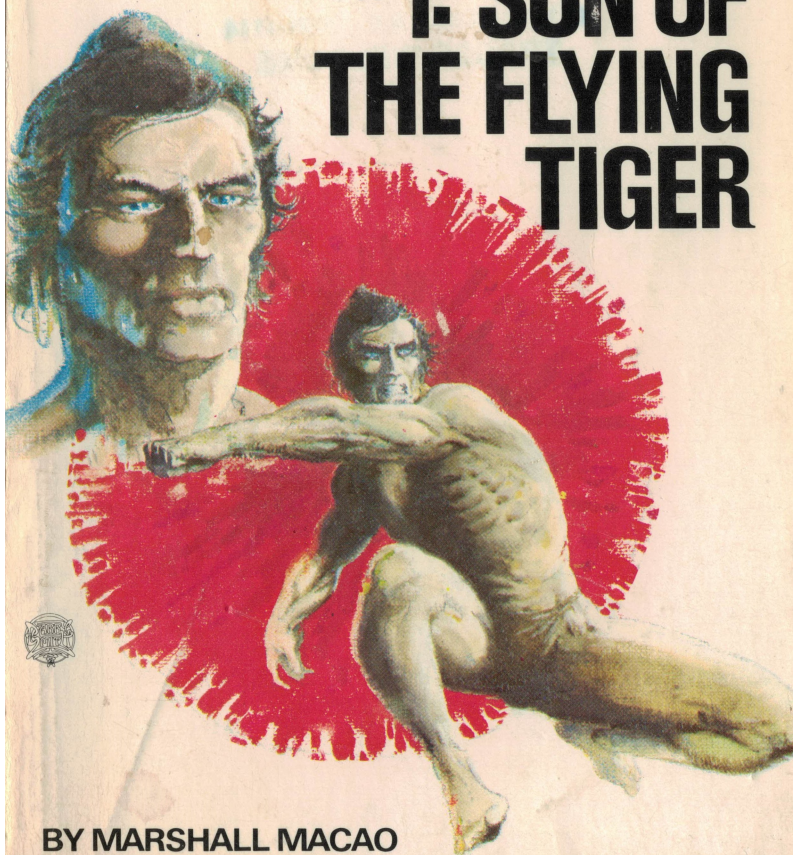


K'ING KUNG-FU

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#1: SON OF THE FLYING TIGER



BY MARSHALL MACAO

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**BY
MARSHALL MACAO**

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Prologue

“Master replaces Master in the bodily cycle of living and dying: and in your time, Chong Fei K'ing, Son of the Flying Tiger, you will be first among the Masters. My enemies will not be yours; for mine are dead. Yet there is but one enemy, with an infinity of faces. And all my fights, you must fight again.” —Lin Fong

RANGOON, BURMA. 26 DECEMBER, 1941. *In a small, dark bar frequented by members of the American Volunteer Group, better known as the Flying Tigers, a radio squawked and sputtered.*

“Hey Martin—turn that thing up, will you?”

The RAF lieutenant seated near the door glanced back toward the source of the request with obvious respect. Nodding quickly at the hard, hawk-nosed man who always squinted as he smiled, the lieutenant put down his beer and reached over his shoulder to spin a dial.

“This is Radio Tokyo,” a hard female voice announced through the static, “with a message for the American Volunteer Group in Rangoon. Give up your despicable, sneaky tactics. You know what we mean. Give up the fight. You cannot win. So when you lose, -do not be taken as dishonorable curs. Give up the tactics you employed yesterday. If you do not, when you are captured you will be treated as guerillas. You will be shown no mercy. None. NONE!”

A hearty, mocking laugh exploded the gloomy

silence of the bar. The hawk-nosed Yankee pounded the table, nearly smashing a pair of flight goggles that sat next to his drink. The two pilots seated next to him chuckled and shook their heads incredulously, waiting for the Flying Tiger to speak.

“For Christ's sake,” he breathed between guffaws. “We come down out of the sun at those bastards with thirteen lousy planes, and we smash the shit out of their formation and shoot down how many?”

The airman at his right responded. “Twenty-three confirmed by wreckage. But we all know another twenty-five or thirty went down in the Gulf or the jungle...”

“And we lose two... and to them that's dirty fighting! Son of a bitch, every time one of those Rising Suns goes crashing down in flames, that's dirty fighting! I guess they want us to stand on the strip and bow, and maybe smile a little, while they bomb the coolies and maybe rake us over with their 7.7's on the way home? Fuck them. No mercy my ass. I don't need their goddamned mercy. I'm gonna take the skin right off their behinds...”

The door to the bar swung open, and an old Chinaman walked in.

The Americans, finished ridiculing Radio Tokyo, went back to their drinks. In a moment, they were aware of a presence before them.

A pair of squinting eyes glanced up, smiling tentatively.

“You are the Flying Tiger,” the Chinaman said, his deep eyes betraying just a hint of the veneration that most of Rangoon's people showered on this man so effusively. He nodded, as if satisfied that he had found the right man. He was met by a look of

friendly puzzlement.

"I'm a Flying Tiger," the Yankee corrected gently. Then, typically cutting across Oriental formality, "You speak English like you were from Cincinnati."

"I have not been to Cincinnati in a long time. San Francisco more recently." He nodded, turned as if to go, and then turned back.

"I am Lin Fong."

"Glad to meet you."

The Chinaman's handshake was not that of a sixty year-old man. The Yankee also noticed that his hand was shaped strangely; it was hard and heavily calloused from the tip of the little finger to the wrist. He wondered what kind of work Lin Fong did. But before he could ask, the Chinaman stopped him with a deeply reflective look. "It is good to be the Flying Tiger," he intoned softly. Then, with a near-bow, he moved off to occupy a table next to the bar's only entrance.

The squinting eyes turned toward the beer on the table before them, and, with a shrug of his shoulders, the Yankee lifted the bottle to his lips.

Suddenly the door to the bar crashed open, and the barrel of a submachine gun stabbed in spitting fire. It was too dark for the assassins, bursting in out of the sunlight, to pick a target, and the first bullets raked the thin wooden walls to pieces and sent liquor and glass showering in torrents.

The Flying Tiger dove for the floor and jammed his hand into his flight jacket, searching for his pistol and keeping his eyes open. But there was no second burst. There was only the streak of a flying body, and the sickening sound of a skull splitting open.

Now the Yankee knew what kind of work Lin Fong did.

But the party wasn't over. The Flying Tiger wasn't one to sit around watching the action, but in this case he had no choice. It was over before he could get off a shot.

There were five of them, piling in from the street through the bar's wide double-doors. Two sub-machine guns and three automatic pistols, all talking. But Lin Fong's diving momentum had carried him out of the line of fire. Hesitating no more over the fact that he had just squashed someone's brains out than the ordinary man would hesitate over having killed a fly, Lin sunk into a deep crouch and came up under them, arms spreading like he was doing the breast-stroke. His right hand caught the second submachine gun and sent it sailing silently over the bar; his left snapped a wrist as if it were a toothpick, and it made no difference, amid the screams of pain, that a pistol continued to dangle in its maimed grasp.

Lin's body, still rising, catapulted over the lines of fire of the last two killers, and as he came down between them his lightning hands cupped their heads—almost gently, as the RAF lieutenant saw it from flat on the floor beneath—and then, with a sharp, willowy snap of the wrists, smashed them together. The sound was as loud as any shot that had been fired, and blood spurted up like juice from a dropped watermelon.

By this time there was a lot of .45 calibre artillery out and ready for use on the two dacoits who were still living. But while Western eyes searched for a shot that would not risk the Chinaman's life, an Eastern body was still moving. Lin went to the floor

again. In one motion he sank onto his back, threw up his legs, sighted between them at the groin of someone foolish enough—having lost his submachine gun—to try and pull a knife, and lashed out.

A split second before, a tough jungle bandit, a hired Burmese murderer, had found his hand on his knife and his enemy's back to him. Now his pelvic bone shattered, and, as one of the airmen later put it, "That guy must have been chewing on his balls." A noiseless scream died in his dilating eyes, and he crumpled.

The last assassin dove toward Lin with bare hands, and as anyone who knew the meaning of the name "Lin Fong" (and there were many...) could have told him, that was simply ridiculous. He speared both his eyes on a pair of forked fingers that drove through to his brain.

There were no more screams of pain, no more scuffles; everyone that needed to be dead was clearly and, more or less cleanly, gone for good.

The RAF lieutenant dragged himself to his feet, a dazed look of awe and disbelief originating from the deepest depth of his blue eyes. "Son of a bitch," he muttered. "He ate that last guy for dessert. He just ate him for dessert!"

Lin Fong looked down at his blood-spattered shirt as if he had spilled paint on it. Taking a deep breath that he did not really need—the kind of deep breath you take on a fresh spring morning—he glanced around to see whether anyone was wounded. No one was. Shaking his head just a bit mournfully, he said to himself, "I never like to do that. Why must men be so evil?"

The first phrase, in English, struck the Flying Tiger as a particularly American way to speak.

The second, in Chinese, was from this old man obviously a purely rhetorical—almost a ritualistic—question.

“Lin Fong?” said a calm, deep voice that moved closer.

The Master turned, a warm but strangely matter-of-fact smile on his lips.

“I am glad to know you.”

And for the second time in one day—only this time a little differently—the Flying Tiger shook hands with the world's greatest Master of Kung Fu.

CHAPTER ONE

The Gobi, The Master, and the Child

The Gobi Desert is a dead pit of sand and gravel and rock carved out of the guts of Asia. Across it wander winds that shift its barren substance endlessly; and with the winds, tribes of nomads come and go, driving their herds of scraggly sheep and bony cattle along the timeless routes from patch to patch of baked-out grassland.

Here is the place where Chong Fei K'ing came to consciousness.

Under the Gobi winds, no place is permanent. But, staring up from his bamboo crib into the weathered, impassively smiling visage of Lin Fong, whose drooping mustache and wispy strands of gray hair gave the infant something palpably human to hold onto among the otherwise lifeless surroundings, the tiny K'ing seemed to see through the sage's dark crystal eyes to an immovable station of refuge and peace.

"We live in this place that is not a place in order to remind ourselves," the ancient mystic would later tell the growing boy, "that everywhere on earth and in heaven the sands are shifting; and, should we try to grasp them, we should grasp only at the empty ghosts of our own immortality.

"Here in the desert, one lets go quickly the ghosts of eternity. One rides the wind, and lives with the sand as it makes and dissolves its restless shapes.

"Here, one can hardly forget to hold to the Tao."

True, the Master's abode was a solid enough structure; a rambling shack of vertical gray boards, surrounded by a zig-zagging fence of woven mat against which the sands piled as they moved. It had withstood the desert's dry ravages for some huge, lost number of decades; and beneath its roof, warm lights glowed in winter, and coolness collected in summer.

But although to K'ing, and to his later companion Kak Nan Tang, this structure was as much a home as any child's house, Lin Fong's piercing eyes looked through and past it as though it were an apparition. His fascination lay in the bottomless heaving of the landscape, and the permanent impermanence which lay beyond; and when occasionally he moved his aging but still-supple body deliberately up the rungs of the ladder to the top of a rickety tower some hundred yards to the north of the shack, he would sit there motionless for days, maintaining his lotus position with the solidity of a rock; and no one, not the child, nor the passing nomads, nor the mysterious woman—the child's mother—who punctuated K'ing's earliest years with the brightness and warmth of her rare visits, could tell what he was seeing, or whether it was in this world or another. Perhaps the child's dim, developing intuitions hinted to him what the nomads and the woman already knew; that had it not been for the presence of young Chong Fei K'ing, the Master would have let the shack collapse to a pile of boards while he sat in his tower or wandered off homeless into the

desert.

Lin Fong was not only in these early years a sage and a mystic to the growing child; he was also a teacher. So regularly, so patiently, did he move to a huge old trunk that sat like a foreign presence by the fireplace, to remove books of all languages from it and describe and explain their contents to his protege, that it took K'ing years to realize that he need not have taken out the books at all. He knew their contents by heart. "It was to show you how a book works," the old man explained one day after he had absently laid a volume down and strolled across the room, continuing to recite as though he were reading. Then he added, as if wondering to himself, "I suppose it is true, a young man should know how a book works."

For years Lin Fong was to the child purely a figure of incomprehensible depth, boundless wisdom, and unshaken inner peace; a portrait of gentleness which, since K'ing knew no other men, he assumed to be a true picture of all men.

The Master's soft, steel-gray hair, flowing down over the shoulders of his plain white cotton robes; his lean, kindly face, whose dark eyes seemed always to sparkle with deeply hidden brilliance and the quiet amusement of the mystic; his trim, hard, well-muscled body, that even in its seventh decade showed no signs of the stiffness or palsy so common among the old nomad men; were so much a part of K'ing's life from infancy that he could hardly have imagined a world without them. Day after day the boy watched the Master's effortless movements as he prepared food or mended the house or the sand fence or drew water from the well. Day after day he listened to the soft, ringing

tones of the voice that seemed to speak of wonder in all things. His manner patterned itself after Lin Fong's. His chestnut hair, bleached to a dark blonde in the summer, grew also to his shoulders; his deep blue eyes, a marvel to the nomads, seemed to give evidence of the same understanding of all things far past the simple comprehension of worldly knowledge. Often a questioning look would flash across his face in response to something he did not feel he understood fully. Then the Master would wait until—as always happened—the questioning look was replaced by a puzzled expression of concentration. Once the boy had satisfied himself that the question was a good one and he did not already know the answer to it, he gave it voice. Always Lin Fong's responses were such as to put the child at peace with himself and his world. It was not that he was keeping notions of conflict and hatred and strife and death from the boy: it was that in their lives, none of these things were real. And to the mind of Lin Fong, none of them were ultimately real anyhow.

Then, suddenly, all changed...so dramatically that, years later, in Canton or New York or Buenos Aires or Cairo, K'ing could hardly conjure up an image of his dead Master's face in its early uncontradicted serenity without other, darker memories crowding in. By these later years his two pictures of Lin Fong had converged into the image of one man seeking the Tao. But this did not wipe away the recollection of that first, profound, world-splitting shock.

These first unhinging memories were not those of Tai Chi; for, from the days when K'ing was first able to move his limbs and make them do his bidding,

Lin Fong made certain that they moved in the forms of this ancient and graceful mode of exercise; so that, by the time the young man had reached the age of speech, Lin Fong could tell him, "Your body has already begun to search after and follow the Tao. Now it remains for your mind to become tuned to it, so that body and mind merge, and together learn the art of going along the Way."

No, these were not the memories that unsettled the young K'ing to the depths of his being—the memories of the streamlike flow of his body through the movements of the Great Circle, the Touching of the Winds, the Tide Flowing In and Out; for these guided his body through a routine of rest and repose, and led him to no suspicion that Tai Chi had any purpose beyond peace. The clashing recollections were of an entirely different kind.

The first was the most vivid scene from his past, save one.

K'ing had passed his eighth birthday. He had gathered the strength, the patience, and the sense of the desert necessary to allow him to wander so far as a day's journey from his home; to find water, or to go without it; to sleep in the sands as they roiled about him, and to awaken, refreshed, just before they shifted so heavily as to bury him fatally. For years, he had seen Lin Fong wander off in just such a manner, wordlessly leaving him to keep his peace at home, to return in a day, or a week, or—as K'ing became totally self-sufficient—a month. During these times, K'ing would sit on his haunches in the doorway, watching for the nomads to come bringing grain and dried fish, drawing water up from the well, carving bits of wood, watching the sand and sky, and meditating. The

nomads bringing food...it was such a part of his life that he never questioned why they did it. Before he had reflected enough to ask the question, before he could realize that Lin Fong had nothing to pay with and nothing to trade, it had been answered.

Now, in the summer of K'ing's eighth year, Lin Fong once more trekked silently away, his flimsy straight white robe blowing at his bony knees, like a cloud sailing off the horizon.

Once more K'ing squatted in the doorway. Absently he munched a bit of dried fish, watching Lin Fong go. The fish, he had been told, came from the ocean. Lin Fong had been to the ocean. He had been across the ocean. He had been across many oceans. But he had said, "The ocean is just like the desert. Except that there are fish in it. There is no need for you to go to the ocean; not once you have fathomed the desert. I suppose some day you will go. Then you will find for yourself, there was no need."

K'ing wondered whether, in his wanderings, Lin Fong might pass by the ocean. Finishing his piece of fish and washing his hands in the sand, he arose and followed the sage's disappearing tracks out into the desert.

Three days' journey, and the Master's trail passed no places of water or food. K'ing felt his first pangs of worry. His parched tongue would barely peel from the roof of his gooey mouth, and his limbs shivered strangely. Always on the distant horizon he would catch glimpses of the ancient wise man's billowing robe.

"The ocean must be a very long way off indeed," he thought to himself.

On the fourth day, the Master passed by a mound of rock that, even in the far distance, showed to K'ing's sharp eyes a trace of green between its crevices.

"I am not Lin Fong," he reminded himself, and left the Master's trail. For a whole night he rested, lapping murky water from a slowly oozing spring, eating grass that crackled in his mouth. Then he said to himself, "I could go back home. But Lin Fong keeps a straight path. If I keep a straight path, perhaps I will run across him."

K'ing never thought that the Master might be angry with him for following. If the old man had no secrets from the desert or the sky, surely he had no secrets from Chong Fei K'ing.

The child kept a straight path for two more days. If Lin Fong had passed the same way, he had left no trace.

And then, six days into the void of dizzying sand, the lone boy struggled to the top of a high rise of packed white pebbles, his ankles sinking deeply into them, and gazed out across a strange flat plain of smooth rock. At its center, in the shade of a huge gray mass of rock, were trees. Beyond them, a straight shiny double line, cross-hatched with half-buried, thicker lines, ran from north to south, disappearing at both horizons. K'ing searched his memory for the word, as he noted the zig-zag fences that lined its either side, their tops barely showing above the sand. "Railroad," he decided. Lin Fong had read to him about railroads.

"Crack!"

A sharp, dim percussion echoed to K'ing's ears on the breeze, and then another.

He had never heard such a sound.

It jangled his nerves with a cutting persistence that made his spine stiffen.

From somewhere inside him, an echo responded.

Suddenly, spontaneously, a shock of excitement jolted through him.

He would walk down and see what was making those sounds.

As he made his way across the face of the pebble-pile, the noises stopped rising out of the trees. Then they came again. They came in groups.

Lin Fong had once taught K'ing to count. It was a strange thing, counting. He had done it, both in Chinese and in English, and sometimes in French. K'ing had failed to see the reason for learning to count in three languages; for although Lin Fong had warned him that when one thought one was saying the same thing in English as in Chinese, one was usually mistaken, this was not the case with counting; it was always the same. To please Lin Fong, though, he had learned to count. He had learned it as a game. He had never seen any use for it even in one language. But now, as the groups of sounds traveled disquietingly to him, he got the urge to count, to see if all the groups were the same. One... two... three... four... five. Silence. One... two... three... four... five. Silence.

The crack of the noises cut into him more deeply as he approached their source. Between the volleys of sound, which he closed his eyes to capture more completely, (they were elusive; one could not meditate on such a sound!) he stared at the trees, which were beyond counting. They were saplings, straight and slim, and their leafy branches

shimmered in the breeze.

He was down on the rocky plain.

He was at the edge of a strand of trees, looking down into a hollow where a clear stream ran.

There was an opening, and a white figure moving slowly, incomprehensibly in it.

He had found Lin Fong.

The sage's robe flowed with his arms around a huge brown timber; the biggest, thickest piece of wood K'ing had ever seen. Behind Lin Fong was a huge pile of such timbers. Dimly the boy recorded that these pieces of wood were the same as the cross-hatchings between the tracks of the railroad.

Lin Fong's body balanced effortlessly against its staggering load, and the railroad tie floated up, and around, and down, guided by Lin's arms until it came to rest, balanced at each end upon a flat rock.

There was a feeling to the Master's movements that K'ing had never felt before. On the surface they were as smooth as the effortless dances of Tai Chi. But while Tai Chi made one's inner tensions flow outward, until one was in balance with the forces of nature all around and moved with them, these actions seemed to be storing tensions up, packing them into the core of Lin Fong's deceptively powerful body.

The Master turned his back on the railroad tie, breathed deeply, and then squared to face it. He stared down into it, as if to fathom the intricate patterns of its grains. There was a second's hesitation, and with fascination and horror K'ing felt even the strength of his own little body being drawn out into the muscles of his Master's slowly

rising right arm. In the flash before the arm fell, K'ing suddenly remembered the heavy, calloused hardness of the side of Lin Fong's right hand. He had never questioned it. He had assumed that when he became old, his hand would come to look that way, for no particular reason.

From the balls of his feet, through his bent knees, quivering thighs, and rock-like back and stomach, to the almost visible bulging of his shoulders beneath his robe, Lin Fong's body contracted in a blinding flash of fury. The side of his right hand crashed down on the timber's center and pulled back—almost, it seemed, before contact had been made.

The sound was like a thunderhead splitting in K'ing's sensitive ears. It was cutting, penetrating, final, issuing from deep in the soul of the wood. The shock and the thrill slammed K'ing backward in awe and confusion.

“One,” he heard himself unconsciously counting.

“Two.”

The wood groaned as Lin Fong, eyes once more boring into the essence of its structure, dealt it another apocalyptic blow. This time the sound was laden with crunching, splintering overtones.

“Three.”

K'ing's head spun with the force of violent impact crashing into his world.

“Four.”

Something in K'ing's blood hardened and sang. The huge tie sagged between the rocks.

“FIVE!”

Cleanly broken, the timber shot its ends upward as its jagged, splintered middle stabbed hard into the ground at Lin Fong's feet.

The jarring mood of harshness was broken with the timber. Breathing deeply, gazing at the sky, the Master brought his right foot rhythmically forward, and raised his hands to cross, palms forward, above his head. His right foot swung back and pointed outwardly slightly, and in the same, unstopping motion his hands broke apart and his arms moved outward. His palms cupped, as if he sought to raise himself a fraction of an inch from the ground on the hot desert air. Then his elbows collapsed lyrically inward, and his hands crossed upon his chest, palms down, fingers resting on opposite collar bones. Finally, his arms swept down, his knees flexed, and he rested his fingertips on his thighs, completing the Tai Chi form of the Sun Wheel.

Hypnotized, K'ing stood meekly, feeling an inexplicable urge to flee from what he had just seen. Some of the foreign feeling eased out of him as he watched the graceful, familiar form of the Sun Wheel. But somehow, he knew that as soon as Lin Fong was finished, he would look up toward his tiny observer, to acknowledge the presence which, K'ing was sure, he had felt all along.

The Master hesitated a ceremonial second, and then, never altering the smooth Tai Chi rhythm, turned his face toward Chong Fei K'ing. He smiled warmly, vaguely, formally; brought his hands together at his chest; bowed; straightened; and spoke, his soft voice ringing like a muffled bell across the empty distance between them.

"You have come six days' journey across the

desert. You are quaking with the power of unimagined things. My son, hold strongly now to the peace of the Tao. For what you have now seen, you will someday master. That you are here means that you are ready. Son of the Flying Tiger: you are ready to learn Kung Fu.”

CHAPTER TWO

Son of the Flying Tiger

Son of the Flying Tiger?

The boy's name was Chong Fei K'ing. He had never been called this other thing. He knew the English words "Son" and "Flying" and "Tiger." But what did they have to do with him?

This was the question he put to Lin Fong, as, together, ancient Master and bewildered boy made their way back home across the desert. "It is time for you to hear the story of your father," the sage told him in response.

"You know what a father is?" K'ing nodded. Like most eight year olds, he had no inkling of the mechanics of reproduction. But from stories Lin Fong had read him, he knew about families, and he knew the kind of a thing a father was. Lin Fong was like a father to him, but he was not really his father.

Lin Fong launched into the story. "Ten years ago there was a great world war growing. You don't know yet what a war is, because none of our reading or talking has touched on wars of fighting. But you know what a country or a nation is. It's a group of people sharing a common land to organize themselves together to do what they couldn't do by themselves... things like building railroads. America is a nation, and China, and so on.

"Now: fighting. For a war is when nations fight. You know that sometimes I ask you to do things

you don't want to do?"

K'ing nodded. It had not happened very often.

"Well, suppose one day you refused to do something I asked."

K'ing looked up at him with a frown. He knew the word "refuse," but he couldn't imagine doing it.

"Yes...?" he asked.

"Then suppose I tried to make you do it. If I wanted you to jump into the air, and you wouldn't, I might pick you up and throw you."

Lin Fong paused as he saw K'ing having a thought. "But if you threw me," the boy said, "I would be up in the air, but I would not have jumped. You would not have made me jump..."

The Master grinned broadly. "At the age of eight," he said, "you are already a great thinker. You are right. But suppose instead I told you, 'Chong Fei K'ing, you must jump into the air or I will do to you what I did to the timbers by the railroad track. I will chop you in half with my right hand'."

K'ing's troubled eyes searched the Master's face, seeking to be saved from the comprehension that was coming to him.

"What would happen to me then?"

"You would be dead."

"Aaah," said K'ing, as if the crux of the problem had been reached. "What is dead?"

"My son," the Master answered, "that is the deepest of all questions." He paused, as if to let his remark sink in. Then, "Some day we will talk about this." He stopped again, setting the boy for a transition. "But this is a story about your father,

and about his fighting and facing death. So for now I will tell you what Americans think death is. For them, it is simply the end. You feel your heart beating?”

The boy nodded.

“And you see the desert, and you ask questions, and you eat, and you think?” K'ing nodded again.

“Americans especially, and many of the world's people, believe deep down that all this— everything you do—depends on the body. When you are dead, your heart no longer beats, your blood no longer flows. Your body comes apart, and you become like dirt or water. There is no more you. You are nothing. For to these people, all things such as dirt and water are lifeless. They are not dead, because they have never been living, but living things, once dead, become lifeless just as they are. These people believe that there are tiny sparks of life on this planet called Earth, fighting to keep themselves burning, to keep themselves from being snuffed out into all the lifelessness around them.

“I do not expect you to understand this. But the fish we eat, the rice, the trees that are now timbers, all these things, once were alive, and now are dead.”

K'ing saw that there was no further to go with this “dead.” He lapsed into silence for a moment. Then a burning question forced its way into his mind. “Lin Fong?”

“Yes?”

“Did you ever make anyone dead?”

Lin gazed quietly out over the horizon. “Did I ever kill anyone is what you are asking. To make

someone dead is to kill him. Yes, I have killed, if what you mean is what the Americans mean by death. I have made men's hearts stop beating, their blood stop flowing..." He stopped abruptly.

The child pushed on: "How many men have you killed?"

Lin Fong looked at him piercingly. "I will answer your question, but you must give me time to count. While I am counting, think on this: you are a child, and just learning counting, and here it seems important. When you become a man, you will not ask how many men someone has killed. You will ask whether he has ever done evil in his killing. Now I will go back in my memory over my life, and the men I have killed. I have been over this list many times, but never to count."

Master and child walked noiselessly over the desert for an hour, performing their separate tasks. Chong Fei K'ing thought he had completed his, but when Lin Fong broke the silence, the shock sent him into confusion again.

"One thousand, nine hundred and ninety-one."

K'ing's eyes bored into the old man's with open disbelief, lost in comprehension seeking relief from the very source that had caused it. But in an instant he frowned at himself, remembering. Then a look came into his eyes that implied a different question.

The sage smiled with satisfaction. Even before K'ing knew anything of the depth or substance of evil, he had accepted their opposition in this world. For a Taoist mystic, seeking only the oblivion of mindlessness, this would not have been necessary. But K'ing's blood, the Master knew, was worldly.

And Lin Fong, although to the depths of his being a Taoist, had early in his life been torn away from the peace of constant meditation and of learning Kung Fu in the conflict-free home of his own Master by a great tragedy which had sent him out into the world. Then he had found it necessary to augment the teachings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu with the insights of other religions and the questioning of other philosophies. If K'ing were ever to be so driven out into the world, the knowledge of its opposition between good and evil must go with him.

"To the true question," the Master smiled a little mournfully, "I can say no more than that I have tried with all my being to hold to the Tao. But you must know, Chong Fei K'ing, that this is not enough, and that my soul is not at rest with the killing I have done. For it is not enough to think that one has not done evil, or to believe it. One must not do evil. And in this life, knowledge of what is good and what is evil is impossible. This is a great burden to mankind, perhaps the burden that most Taoists seek to throw off when they search for peace of mindlessness."

Lin Fong and Chong Fei K'ing walked another hour in silence. Then, Lin Fong said, "Now you know what fighting is, and what death and the threat of death are; and now you may understand wars. For wars are just nations that fight against one another. Perhaps one nation wants another to do something that it does not want to do. Sometimes it is something so ridiculous as jumping into the air. Wars are fought for many reasons—over wealth, or land, or even for reasons of honor. But we will not go into this; for all that is necessary now is that you know what a war is."

K'ing kept his silence for a time, and the Master glanced more than once at the troubled cloudiness that had come into his eyes. But finally, his gaze cleared, and he asked Lin to continue with the story of his father.

The sage took the rest of the morning reciting history.

In 1937, on the eve of the Japanese invasion of China, a retired American combat pilot who had turned to death-defying aerial acrobatics, and who had written a famous book on combat aviation, had been invited by Madam Chiang Kai-shek to survey the preparedness of the Chinese air force.

By 1941, Japanese planes, virtually unopposed in the air, had made a bloody pulp out of China's cities while the Rising Sun spread its scarlet stain over more and more of Asia. This man had gone to America, and bought planes for the Chinese, and brought back the one hundred most deadly combat pilots in the history of warfare from the army and navy and marine bases of the United States to fly them.

That afternoon Lin Fong told how he himself had made his way to Burma at this time.

He had arrived in Rangoon just after a squadron of this American Volunteer Group had been wrenched from their training program by the bomb blasts of Pearl Harbor and sent to defend that city. In Rangoon were the docks and the rail head that formed the western end of blockaded China's wartime supply line. From there, the materiel without which Chiang Kai-shek's armies would have perished set out on its torturous journey over the Burma Road. The American Volunteer Group

was to defend this city against the Imperial Japanese Army Air Force, with its thousands of planes and experienced, fearless pilots.

After all this had been told, Lin Fong and Chong Fei K'ing went to sleep in the sand.

When they awoke and pushed on toward home, the Master spent the morning telling the boy all about air war; about various kinds of planes, about great air battles of history, and about his father's genius for fighting in the sky. He described in great detail the planes of the Flying Tigers, which were called Curtis P-40Cs. They had been rejected by the British because they were not good enough to send against the Luftwaffe. These planes were heavily armored, possessed great fire power, and were faster than the Japanese planes in level flight or in a dive; but they climbed more slowly and could not turn as tightly or maneuver as well. He told how the Tigers had painted the noses of these planes with shining white teeth and gaping red mouths.

Then he told how K'ing's father had trained his pilots.

His tactics had been unorthodox at that time. He had taught them to fly in pairs, with the lead plane going in for the kill while a wing man protected him. He had forbidden them to engage in dog fights with the more maneuverable Japanese planes, but had showed them how to drop in shuddering power-dives out of the sun onto the backs of enemy formations, blasting Rising Suns out of the air with their thundering guns. He had taught them how to slice through fighter cover to get to the bombers that had made so many Asian cities into charred and bloody masses of ruins, and how to dive out of trouble and regain the sun again quickly for

another lightning-bolt attack.

"There are lessons in this," the sage told the boy, "for all fighting is in the end the same..."

When he was done with all this, Lin Fong told a story. He told it in English, which the boy knew as well as he knew Chinese. He told it with excitement in the memory.

"It was December 25—Christmas Day to the Western world—in 1941. There were twenty-five American fliers at an air base called Mingaladon, near Rangoon. Twenty-five; no more.

"Two days before, this Hell's Angels squadron of the Flying Tigers had fought its first battle. They had lost two planes, the Royal Air Force five, and the Japanese ten. It had not been good enough. Rangoon had been heavily strafed and bombed. Three thousand people had been killed.

"The streets were running with blood. The city was burning. Bands of looters ravaged it, spreading horror. The war supplies without which Chiang Kai-shek's army would have perished were sitting on the docks, and if they were not burning, there were no more coolies to unload them; they had all fled from the terror of the bombing.

"On Christmas Day the Japanese returned.

"I was standing by the side of the runway at the Flying Tigers base at Mingaladon. I had slept there for two nights, waiting to see the planes take off for a battle and keeping my eyes open in case the Japanese had hired dacoits—Burmese robbers who terrorized the jungle highways in armed bands—to attack the base or do damage to the planes.

"Suddenly three men ran to their planes and

took off. I thought there would be a battle. But I had to wait.

“Some time later ten Tigers scrambled, and the roar filled my ears as they streaked off into the sky. I made my way to the docks of Rangoon. But as I left the base, I heard one lone engine coming from the north-west.

“Now you must know that the history books say during this second air battle over Rangoon, your father was over five hundred miles away at the main Flying Tiger base at Kunming, in China. But the Tigers' planes could travel three hundred and forty-five miles in a single hour, and at that rate it is not far.

“I watched the lone plane land and taxi to the fuel pumps. On the road to the docks, I heard another hovering overhead and saw a single plane climbing into the sun.

“I had not been at the docks long before I heard a sound like a beehive on the horizon. History says that there were sixty Japanese bombers and twenty fighters. The formations split over the Rangoon River, and the planes that did not go toward the air base at Mingaladon headed straight for us.

“The Tiger planes were nowhere to be seen as the bombers bore down on the docks. But suddenly, there were ten vertical streaks in the sky. Like sharks through a school of small fish, the Tigers tore downward into the Japanese formation, guns flaming. One bomber burst into a flash of fire. Another smoked and reeled downward. I watched as it exploded on a hillside. Then a third dropped down out of formation, a Tiger pouring lead into its tail as it faltered. Its nose dived and shattered into

the Gulf of Martaban.

“The Japanese formation was broken. The Tigers dove through it, and the Japanese fighters could not catch them. The bombers flew in twos and threes now, and far away I could see the squadron of Tigers climbing back for another attack. You must understand—all of this took place in a little more time than it takes to tell it. At the same time, other Tigers were fighting another battle with Japanese pursuit planes high above. Now and then a Rising Sun would fall from the heavens into the Gulf or onto the land.

“The main Tiger force came back again, screaming down in dives that shuddered with the force of gunfire. I could not believe my eyes. Five Nakagima bombers fell from the sky in the space of several minutes, and the rest dropped their bombs into the rice paddies and jungles and fled.

“The battle raged on, as the planes with the red jaws and grinning teeth fought the invaders away from the docks.

“And then, with the Hell's Angels flying low, chasing the strays from the first broken formation, another wave of bombers appeared; twenty, with eight fighter escorts. The Tigers could not regain the sun for an attack, so they skimmed low over the sea, and suddenly, as one, turned upward and slashed into the formation from underneath. The noise of their guns was like the Last Judgement.

“Until this time I had seen nothing of the lone plane that had arrived at Mingaladon to refuel after the others had left. If you ask the historians who have written about this battle—and there are many, for it is one of the most glorious tales in all the

history of warfare—they will tell you that there was no lone plane. But if you ask those who did not take cover, but who stood out on the docks with me and watched the fight, they will tell you that just as one Tiger named Smith blew up a Japanese bomber at such close range that its flying pieces crippled his plane, they saw a single, droning black dot against the sun, among the highest clouds.

“This single plane that hovered above the battle for so long, conserving gas and waiting, was not supposed to be there. The Flying Tigers were forbidden to fly alone. And in fighting forces, you must understand, the commander is not supposed to risk his life; he is supposed to stay out of the battle, directing the action. Now this may sound wrong to you, but there was only one man like your father, and had he died in this battle, the Flying Tigers would have been without their guiding genius.

“Another Tiger plane, flown by a man named Overend, had taken heavy fire, and its controls were all but gone. It made for the jungle in a slow flat dive.

“A third, flown by a man named Dupuoy, its guns jammed, rammed one of the lighter, more fragile Japanese planes, exploding it and sheering off several feet from its own right wing. This plane also limped off toward the air base at Mingaladon.

“Now the rest of the Hell's Angels were far away chasing the fleeing Japanese past the Mouths of the Irrawaddy and on over the Bay of Bengal. The few ancient planes of the Royal Air Force were battling several that had circled back in a last attempt to bomb the docks. These planes were so bad that the R.A.F. suffered many casualties. But you must

know that the Royal Air Force fights well. Of fifty ships in the harbor, only one was bombed that day.

“Now, suddenly, out of the clouds, came a new wave of Japanese fighters—streaking in hard, thirsty for the blood of the Royal Air Force, and of those Tigers whose planes were crippled. There were thirty-five of these. I counted them myself. The history books say nothing of them. Perhaps the historians were hiding in the rice paddies; and none of us who saw could tell of it, for the Flying Tigers later came and told us, 'You saw nothing. If you talk, the Japanese will learn that our leader sometimes does these things, and the next time they will send one thousand planes into the sun, searching for the single Tiger who hovers over the battle until the time is right for him to strike.'

“But I, Lin Fong saw this. And later, I was told of all that happened in the air; of the radio communications between the Tiger pilots, and of the thinking that your father used. And this was how it was:

“Smith was fighting his damaged ship back toward the base alone. He could see no other Tigers.”

Suddenly Smith's radio talked with a hard, familiar, yet unexpected voice. 'Smith, this is Old Man above you; repeat, Old Man above you. I am your cover. Eighteen bandits at fourteen angels and closing. Limber your guns. Can you climb?'

'Negative.'

'Proceed to Mingaladon. Do not deviate from course. I will miss you by six feet in a power dive, full throttle, head on. Repeat: do not deviate from

course. Proceed to Free Beer.'

"The Japanese closed hard on Smith. He was barely out of the range of their guns when suddenly the mad snarl of an engine from nowhere burst upon them. Their victim split in two before their eyes, and gave birth to grinning white teeth, scarlet jaws, and a propeller that flew into their faces like a threshing machine.

"They opened fire, and their light guns chattered. But then the low thunder of the Flying Tiger's 50's crashed upon them.

"The Japanese fired constantly, wildly.

"The Flying Tiger fired with the rhythm of a scythe through grass.

"Between each of his short, clipped phrases came a blinding flash and then a sharp, final retort. The armor on the gas tanks of the Japanese planes was too thin, and the Flying Tiger was bursting these one by one as he dove at eight miles a minute, dancing his ship through a maze of crazy gun fire, right and left, up and down. He was like a child running through a room full of balloons, popping them with a pin.

"On this first attack there were five such flashes, five such sounds, and the Japanese scattered out of the path of this death-machine. They left Smith alone and turned tightly—those unlucky thirteen that were left—to free themselves of this lone menace: to get quickly onto his tail and blast him from the sky.

"After any such attack, the Tigers always screamed away in power dives, leaving the enemy behind. But this Tiger could not afford such a

luxury; for his escape would mean the death of Smith, and the loss of his plane. So he did what he had forbidden his pilots to do; he pulled back on the stick and shot the nose of his ship straight upward, challenging the remaining Japanese to a dogfight. Thirteen to one.

“He had got some distance on his enemies, for they had to turn as he pulled upward. Now you must understand that these planes, going straight upward, will stall, and if the pilot does not have all his wits about him, they will spin out of control and smash to the earth. As the Japanese came up beneath this lone P-40, it reached the height of its vertical climb, and its engine went silent. Slowly, it half-rolled and peeled off. Then it plummeted straight downward into the Japanese guns, its engine roaring once more to life.

“Now the Japanese, a fearless people, found fear flying their planes. They moved erratically in the face of this bizarre attack. But the Flying Tiger flew methodically, delicately, never wasting motion, never wasting lead. He raked cockpits, tore off wings, cut ships in half. I tell you, there was much of the blood of the Imperial Japanese Air Force flowing in the skies on that day. On this second run, four Rising Suns fell like autumn leaves from the sky, and three more limped off, controls shot away, gas tanks leaking. The Flying Tiger left the wounded to find their own deaths, as he careened after Smith in a long dive. He was sure they would follow.”

'Old Man to Smith; I've thinned them out a little. Want to save my ammo. How's your's?'

'Smith to Old Man; lots of 30, some 50. All hot

to shoot.'

'Do you have lateral movement?'

'Affirmative.'

'Can you get to that cloud at eleven o'clock?'

'Affirmative.'

'What is your air speed?'

'Three-three-oh.'

'Maintain three-three-oh. Enter the cloud. If I set up a target for you, can you hit it?'

'I'll be fucked if I can't.'

'That's right. I am coming into a climb in front of your cloud. Will come into gun range of lead bandits as they cross your sights. Come out with all switches on. Don't miss.'

'Order received and understood. Out.'

"The Flying Tiger waited a few seconds until the distance was right between himself and the closing pursuits. Then he tore upward in a hard climb.

"Over his radio he could hear the Japanese chattering with glee at his stupidity. Their planes could out-climb his. And that stalling tactic would not work twice.

"A little outside of gun range they caught him in their sights and opened up.

"His ship bounced to the right, and then back. Their eyes glued to his tail, they followed his every move as they closed rapidly. Why did he not take refuge in that cloud?

"Suddenly the cloud itself burst forth with the screaming lead of death. The two lead Japanese

ships burst into thousands of searing pieces, and the rest flew through the hail-storm, bits of hot metal slashing at their fragile crafts. They scattered as the Old Man tore back down into them.”

'Old Man to Smith. Nice shooting.'

'You run a good gallery.'

'Hey, look at that one disabled Jap heading for the base!'

'Yeah —if he runs that crate into the hangar, he'll die a happy man.'

'Can you wipe that bastard out before he spills the Beer?'

'Affirmative.'

'Good. Have urgent business elsewhere. See you later.' Then, *'Smith...'*

'Smith here.'

'Draw me a cold one will you?'

'Order received and understood. Out.'

“Then the lone plane climbed away into the sky again, searching for the crippled planes of two more Tigers.

“The Flying Tiger found Dupuoy struggling to maintain speed, flying with brilliance as he made up for the lift lost from his right wing and correcting for the torque of his propeller which threatened to send him into a fatal spin. Seventeen Japanese fighters on their way to strafe the base at Mingaladon were about to overtake him.

“This time the Old Man held the heights behind the enemy. He dropped on them from behind,

gunning down two. The rest scattered, thinking that they had been ambushed by a whole Tiger squadron. A moment's confusion, and Dupouy escaped. The Flying Tiger twisted and turned in his dive, blasting Japanese planes as they drifted across his sights. On this run I could see your father destroy five enemies.

"Then two of them decided that they would gladly give their lives if they could rid the skies of the invincible menace. They bore in on him head on in a Kamikaze attack.

"They expected him to dive toward safety.

"The nose of his plane made a dipping motion, and they drove their ships down after him. In my mind's eye I could already see this horrible three-plane crash, and the pieces of flesh settling downward toward the earth.

"But then the Tiger's nose pushed up, and his ship rolled till one wing pointed to heaven, the other to earth.

"It is hard to judge distances in the air from so far away, but for a moment the three planes looked like one. The wing of one of the Japanese planes could not have missed the cockpit of your father's by more than a few feet. Yet he used to fly in acrobatic shows with three planes tied together by short pieces of rope. He had his eyes open, and his mind clear.

"There was a thundering crash, like a bomb exploding in the sky, and smoking shower of wreckage floated downward. The two Japanese planes had collided.

"The P-40 righted itself and flew off.

“You should have heard the cheering from the tiny group of us that stood in the open on the docks of Rangoon.

“But the Flying Tiger was not finished. There was still Overend's plane, trying to find a place to crash land in the jungle. The lone P-40 turned to where a dozen Japanese fighters were just setting upon him.

“For an instant, the hills blocked our view. But I climbed a mast of the ship, and then I could see.

“The Japanese planes were poised for their dives of death as Overend pulled in his landing gear and prepared to skid down in a rice paddy. You see, he could have bailed out, but he was fighting to save his plane. It was one twenty-fifth of the whole Tiger force.

“The Old Man ducked down behind a hill and waited. As the Japanese peeled off, one by one, for their attack, he erupted up out of the ground, guns blazing into their bellies. There was a blossoming of fire over the swamp. One... two... three enemies went down, and a fourth came into his sights. But his guns were silent.

“My heart jumped to my mouth. His guns were jammed, or were empty. That was what I thought. But it was another trick.

“Breaking off suddenly, he looped, flying on his back, showing his underbelly to the planes that descended upon him. They forgot the damaged ship in the rice paddy and took off to wreak their vengeance on this terrible executioner, who had first led them slowly.

“But then, suddenly, the P-40 snapped around, and its throttle slammed to the firewall.

“The Japanese screamed over their radios for any of their planes that could cut off his escape over the housetops of Rangoon. When they found no help, they broke off and strafed the city.

“Their bullets tore at the fragile buildings and mowed down fleeing coolies, panicked women, confused children, ancient beggars, crippled soldiers.

“With an angry snarl the lone plane shot into the sky and looped to set back upon them.

“At that moment, four Hell's Angels returned from over the Bay of Bengal.

“So intent were the Japanese fighters on their mission of murder that they did not see the lone plane shooting up and coiling back like a cobra, to strike them from out of the sun. They heard, but could not translate, the messages that came over their radios through the smoke-filled air.

“Hell's Angels, this is Old Man. Repeat, this is Old Man. No Free Beer yet. I am low on fuel and ammo. I've been playing games over here. Do you have any lead left?”

“Old Man, this is Headman,” came the reply. “Fuel for twenty minutes maybe. More lead in my ship than in my guns. What's up?”

The Flying Tiger spoke into his radio even as he slammed his throttle once more to the firewall and screamed down for the kill. “Ten butcher bandits strafing the city. I am closing. Repeat, I am closing. Do what you can. Out.”

“And then those lethal guns ripped their streams

of fury out of his raging dive. One enemy ship shuddered, fell, and cartwheeled through the low, brown rows of houses, bursting into a ball of flame that meant a setting sun. Another came into his sights, and, controls shot away in his desperate climb, it flew for the sun until it stalled. Then it fluttered slowly, lazily almost, into the bay."

'Headman to Old Man. We get the idea.'

'Good thing. My guns are empty.'

'Take a rest.'

"Four Tigers rolled and peeled downward in whining, blasting dives. The Hell's Angels had taken over. The lone Tiger plane buzzed softly away over the rooftops toward Mingaladon.

"The history books say that Headman's plane landed that day with one pint of gas. They do not record that another plane, after hours of full-throttle combat, landed on fumes. They do not even record that it was there.

"But I, Lin Fong, saw these things with my own eyes. There was only one man in all the world who could fly like that. It was the Flying Tiger, and, Chong Fei K'ing, you are his son."

CHAPTER THREE

Protector of the Nomads

On the last day of their homeward journey through the desert, Lin Fong recited to K'ing an ancient creed whose origins had long since been forgotten, which his Master had recited to him just before he had begun to learn Kung Fu.

Young boy! You are to learn Kung Fu? Listen then to the names of the blows, for they will lead you to their secrets. Knife Slash. Knife Point. Hammer. Ram's Head. Scorpion. Pounding Wave. Monkey. Rock Smash. Tiger Claw. And the kicks: Lightning Kick. Dragon Stamp. And the parries: Whipping Branch. Leaping Deer. Boulder. Swooping Bird.

To learn these, you must at first attend to the Masters. But to become a Master, you must watch the pounding wave, the swooping bird, the whipping branch. For the forces of Kung Fu come not from man, but from nature; and each true Master meditates upon the forces of nature, till he draws up from within himself that soul which is part of nature; his part of it. You must be still, and take into yourself the rhythms of the ocean, the tree, the bird. Then, when the time comes, the forces of evil will be as little able to touch you as they are able to halt the pounding wave, dodge the whipping branch, catch the swooping bird.

But this is not enough. You yourself, out of the

deepest rhythms of the Cosmos, must find a Way between these motions as effortless as the motions themselves; you must turn the pounding wave into the whipping branch, and mix it with the kick of lightning. You must meditate until your mind is gone, and ride the currents that connect all things without stumbling. Then, when the time for fighting comes, your earthly self will perch above you on a branch, singing the tune to which your body dances through danger.

You must be ready for death at every moment, so that you will not fear it. Then you will happen not to die. And if in the fight you are truly riding the Wind that Blows in the Void, if you have found the Tao and are travelling on it; if all thought of vengeance has left you, and you are alone on the monsoon sea, using its very currents to keep from drowning; then if your time has come to pass by what men call death, you will merge with the waters gracefully, and no trembling part of you will be left behind to feel pain.

Lin Fong and Chong Fei K'ing had been home for several days, and the child's training in Kung Fu had begun. On the first day, Lin had given the boy many long hours of demonstration, beginning with one-man forms, and then going through the separate parts of two-man forms, sometimes using the young boy as a dummy and sometimes using an imaginary opponent.

Finally he closed his eyes and folded his arms across his chest. "Now, you will see me fight seven imaginary enemies at once. I am imagining them to be all around me, and I build each one up in turn out of nothing, making him a certain height and

weight, and giving him certain strengths and certain weaknesses—but only so much of this as I could determine by a quick glance before a fight. All you will see at first is old Lin Fong jumping and whirling and slashing by himself in the desert; but later, perhaps you will be able to see these imaginary enemies as vividly as I now do, and will be able to construct some for yourself, so that you may practice in this way.”

Lin Fong continued to stand still for another few moments. K'ing watched with fascinated curiosity. Suddenly, Lin's hands shot out sideways, and his legs likewise jumped in a flash to a fighting stance, his toes curling into the hot sand.

At first, when Lin Fong suddenly slashed out with arms and legs, and began whirling and ducking and spinning, K'ing could see no more than an indecipherable blur of lethal motion.

But after a time, his eyes became quicker, and he was able to count the number of different attacks and defences that he was carrying on at the same time. K'ing could not imagine himself at any time approaching the Master from any direction without being chopped to pieces, and finally, after Lin Fong had stopped four or five times to rest and give the boy a chance to think, he found that he could in fact put imaginary enemies in seven places at once, and see how Lin Fong was dealing with all of them. But most of all, he was taken with the consummate balance and rhythm of Lin Fong's movements. He knew that it would be years before he could do anything like this.

When Lin Fong was satisfied that the young boy had a good over-all idea of what Kung Fu was, K'ing began to learn its actual practice as any other

beginner learns, by perfecting several basic stances—among them the Horse-Riding Stance and the Stance of the Cat. Lin Fong told him these postures would make him feel the different attitudes one might assume in fighting Kung Fu style, but that they were stylized and largely of ritualistic value. In confronting a live and dangerous enemy, one would not profit much from squaring off in the Horse Stance, even though the position—knees flexed, feet spread far apart, fists clenched palms-up at the sides with elbows pointing straight backward—was an especially solid and powerful defensive one, and prepared one to spring quickly to either side or to deliver a wide array of blows and kicks. Likewise, the Stance of the Cat, with the right foot reaching lightly forward, toes grazing the ground as the knee flexed, and the left foot bearing most of the weight nearly perpendicular to it behind, was a stance that gave rise to quick, graceful movement in any direction, and was especially adapted to slashing, clawing, or poking attacks and sharp, high kicks, as well as to swift retreats.

But, Lin Fong said, unless the age of ceremonial combat returned, it was usually a waste of time and an affectation to assume these postures at the beginning of a fight: better to attack with speed and surprise, or to defend instinctively, and leave the posing to fighters who wanted to impress people. The Master assured K'ing that if he practiced these routines well, he would find himself automatically assuming many stances for split-second intervals during combat, when he needed the advantages that they offered. But their primary use was to fit the young boy's body to the basic forms of Kung Fu combat; to train his sense of balance, and to put

him in touch with the source of his body's potential for action.

Chong Fei K'ing found these stances, and the movements that grew out of them, natural and easy after his years of Tai Chi discipline, although at first he found it difficult to make attacking movements with the brutal finality that they required. The Master, though demanding and relentless in his pursuit of perfection, smiled often on his protege's efforts. After long practice sessions, he sat on his haunches watching the boy draw water from the well, nodding his head in satisfaction.

On the fifth day, he said to K'ing: "I never doubted that you could become a Master. You have come only a few tiny steps on a road that is a thousand miles long, but you move with the ease and speed of the wind. No other pupil would I have taken into my home and agreed to teach before his tenth year. In all of China—and I have searched the country for many years, seeking children to teach—there is none but the Son of the Flying Tiger whom I would have reared nearly from birth for this purpose, knowing that the very blood of his father and mother assured that he could become the greatest of the Masters." He drank a little water and gazed up into the sky.

The child glowed momentarily with warmth and pride, but the mention of his mother brought a questioning look into his face. "Lin Fong?" he began tentatively.

The sage nodded his head in short, slow movements. "I know," he said. "Now you will ask me about your mother. Let me say only that, as your father was a man among men, your mother was a

woman among women." He broke off. Then he turned to regard the boy closely. "The story of your mother is full of myth and mystery. Someday you will hear it, but not for many years, and not from me." Then, as if to take K'ing's mind off the subject, he made a startling revelation.

"A companion is coming for you. Another boy."

He stopped to assess K'ing's reaction to this news. The child only looked up and, in his own wise way, said, "Yes?..."

"Yes," Lin Fong grinned. "This is the only boy in China besides you who I wish to have as my pupil. He is ten years old—nearly two years older than you. His name is Kak Nan Tang." Lin Fong paused. "At least," he said, returning to the subject that still raised questions in the boy's mind, "you know the story of your father. Kak knows nothing of his lineage, nor will he hear anything of it from me but that it is as great and glorious as yours. The two of you will be my pupils partly because of the circumstances of your births..."

No sooner had Lin Fong finished this short speech than an unexpected shout carried to the ears of Master and boy across the desert sand.

K'ing looked up and saw two nomads, an old man and a young girl, struggling toward them, exhaustion and barely-stale terror written in their desperate, lunging movements.

But Lin Fong saw something more. He saw his old friend Ton Te Ming, with his five-year-old granddaughter Sui-ding, their faces twisted with what only could have been the impact of a recent confrontation with death. He knew that some great tragedy had befallen the small, impoverished tribe

of this old patriarch, and that soon Chong Fei K'ing would have an answer to a question that to the sage's knowledge the boy had not yet asked—the question of why passing nomad tribes, from their impoverished stocks of food, kept an old recluse and his young pupil supplied even in the very hardest of times.

Lin Fong took a deep breath, and felt strength rising in his ancient limbs. He walked a few steps out into the desert to meet his friend of many decades. His visage was impassive. A brief second passed in which his consciousness went blank. As always before a battle, he took an instant to plunge down into the depths of his mind, and to unite briefly with the ever-flowing currents of the cosmos—to grasp at the strength and peace of the Tao.

“Lin Fong!” the old man gasped, and from a distance of ten feet the Master could see his cheeks, wrinkled, the color and texture of walnuts, lined with the salt of dried tears.

“Lin Fong, we have been attacked! Ton Chan and his family are butchered! The guts of our sheep and cattle lie stinking in the sun near the Place of the Steep Rocks.”

Lin Fong's gaze remained steady as, deep down, his heart wrenched and burned. Ton Te Ming's son, slaughtered with his young wife and all his children! A younger man perhaps would have questioned how such a thing could have happened to these simple desert people: for who could be their enemies? But Lin Fong knew that the winds of evil blew everywhere, and he had long since ceased to search for their source.

The Master turned sharply to K'ing. “Fill a pouch

with food, and bring two skins of water. Hurry!"

Then he turned back to Ton Te Ming, whose eyes moved restlessly, trembling in their deep sockets as he told the story.

His tribe, forty people in all, with their camels and tents and flocks, had been making for the Place of the Steep Rocks, where large formations of granite jutted up out of the desert for nearly a mile. It was the only oasis for hundreds of miles where they could water their beasts and let them graze in the grasslands nearby.

But before they could approach the watering hole that lay just beyond its first northern spire of rocks, they had been confronted by a single, tall man with bushy hair, who in a strange dialect and fearsome tones had told them that evil spirits had taken over the place, and that they must pass around it and never return; and that they must tell all the other tribes never to approach the Place of the Steep Rocks again.

The elders of the tribe had conferred, and had told the man that if they were forced to move on, their flocks and they themselves would surely perish; and that they would try to propitiate the evil spirits after the manner of their fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers down through the centuries.

The man with the bushy hair, dressed in a strangely ancient-looking leather skirt and wearing a sabre in his belt, had told them that the spirits could not be propitiated; that they were led by the spirit of Genghis Khan himself; and, his eyes growing thin and hard above his high Mongol cheekbones, had hissed at them, "If you stay, the

ghost of Genghis Khan will take his bloody toll among the strongest of your number." Then he had left.

Ton Te Ming had withdrawn a distance of a few hundred yards to the edge of the rocks, and there he and the other elders had set to discussing what to do next. Ton Chan, his strong and fearless son, had scoffed at the threats and drawn his skinning-knife. Suddenly, without warning, the thundering of hooves had filled the air, and half a dozen screaming horsemen had descended upon them, long, curved sabres flashing.

The first of them had beheaded Chan with a single stroke, and, as the rest of the stricken tribe scattered, the invaders had hauled his family from their tent and executed them. Then, stopping only to bum their tents and disembowel their sheep and cattle, the men had retreated, still screaming, into the rocks.

Lin Fong had his own ideas as to why someone might want to keep the nomads away from the Place of the Steep Rocks, but there was no time to explore them now, nor any need. The Master knew that they would learn the nature of the evil they faced soon enough.

"The boy and I leave immediately," he said. "Do you wish to go with us, or to remain here with the child?"

Sui-ding, her hardy but somehow delicate beauty all but lost in the panic that still played in her wide, dark eyes, gazed up trembling as her fate was decided.

Lin Fong knew the answer before he spoke. "The girl will stay," Ming said. "No one would dare to

harm her in the house of Lin Fong. Myself—I will go with you, though I die on the way!”

Lin Fong stared down at him. “You will not die on the way,” he said simply. “You will not die because you are ready to die, because you no longer care about life.”

Chong Fei K'ing, returning with the food and water, heard with surprise a grim hardness in the tones of his Master's voice. The sounds awakened in him the same echoes that he had felt when he had first heard the sharp noise of cracking timbers near the railroad tracks.

They brought forth the same feeling that had electrified him upon hearing the tales of his father's battles.

Lin Fong took the food pouch and water skins from him. “Take Sui-ding inside,” the Master instructed, “and show her where the food is kept. Show her also the trap door that leads to the hollow beneath the house. Tell her that if anyone comes—anyone at all—she is to hide there and not come out until our return. Go quickly.”

K'ing did as he was told, leading the little girl inside and noting with satisfaction her quick grasp of her instructions even in her almost paralyzed state of fear. By the time he had emerged from the house, Ton Te Ming was standing at Lin Fong's side, some strength seemingly having returned to his grief-racked body.

“How many days' journey is it to the place?” the Master asked.

“We have walked two days,” Ming said, “but the girl needed water, and we went by the way of the Spring of the Three Trees. Also, we slept.” He said

this almost with shame. "Straight across the desert, we may reach there by morning." "Good."

Lin Fong threw the water-skins over one shoulder and the food pouch over the other and, dressed only in his thin robe, and weaponless, he set out at a fast pace across the sand. Chong Fei K'ing had to trot once in a while to keep up with his rapid pace, and Ming himself soon was breathing hard.

Not a word was spoken between the three until nightfall.

Then, as the sun set over the slowly heaving waves of the desert, staining the sky a wide and deep orange, Lin Fong turned to K'ing. "You must know," he said, "that these are men and not spirits we are facing; that these tales of Genghis Khan and these men with sabres are but a deception. In this age of guns, but few men rely upon their own bodies or such weapons as sabres to do their fighting. Chong Fei K'ing..."

The boy could feel that instructions were coming. He was silent.

"If you hear the noises of guns, which I have often described to you—if you see the flashes of their muzzles, if you hear their bullets whizzing through the air—you must bury yourself in the sand where no one can see you, and you must stay until the fighting is over. Do you understand?"

The Son of the Flying Tiger did not like this much, but he nodded his head in agreement.

Before the sun rose the next morning, the Place of the Steep Rocks was in sight on the pale horizon. Ming had told the rest of his tribe to retreat three days' journey to the south, and to await him there.

Now the Place of the Steep Rocks was silent as Lin Fong lay on a low ridge, his head peeking over to gaze at its thick gray towers of rock and the few low scraggly trees that grew in their shade.

After a moment, he crawled back down and walked to where his protege stood with Ming in a dry, rocky gully.

"We will approach from the north," he said simply. "We will walk across the desert straight to the place and we will see what happens. There is no use trying to conceal ourselves. They will have lookouts posted." He turned to Ming. "Do you think that any of their number will recognize you?"

The old man squinted into the sun and frowned. "Only the tall man with the bushy hair," he said. "If he is there, he will know me."

"That is not good," Lin Fong said, as they followed the gully northward. Lin Fong's eyes searched the ground, and in a moment he came up with a sharp piece of stone that looked like flint. He handed it to Ming. "Cut off your hair with this," he said, "until you are all but bald. He will never know you then." As they continued their march, the old man wordlessly obeyed, leaving a trail of long, gray, wispy hairs behind him. When he was finished, Chong Fei K'ing could hardly recognize the old nomad himself.

The sun was just beginning to rise as the trio swung back to approach the steep rocks from the north. "At least," Lin Fong said, "If we come toward them this way, they will not suspect that we have anything to do with the tribe of nomads that has fled to the south. They will treat us as newcomers, and perhaps we may learn something."

Chong Fei K'ing's pulse quickened as his calloused bare feet felt hard stone under them instead of soft sand. The first tower of rock was placidly lifeless as they passed beneath its shadow. Lin Fong was making for the watering-hole. K'ing felt trapped.

But they neither saw nor heard any signs of life.

Lin Fong had purposely avoided going past the carnage that the murderers had wrought, or even going within sight of it. "If they are here, and they are watching us, then they will know that we know that something is wrong if we go by there."

The trio walked all the way to the watering-hole. Although they were not thirsty, Lin Fong made them kneel down and lap up the water with their tongues. The air was perfectly still about them on this windless day, and the ripples in the pool spread the lemon-yellow morning sunlight out over the clear, shallow water as it would have on any other desert morning.

The water was perfectly pure, and the bottom of the pool was black, and K'ing, looking from his own reflection to those of the two older men, noticed for the first time that while the eyes of Lin Fong and Ton Te Ming were dark, his were blue, like two holes of sky in his face. He had never seen eyes like his before, and they were to him a mystery.

Lin Fong stopped lapping the water. Droplets of it streamed from his drooping mustache. His eyes were bright, and his expression showed no trace of alarm as he whispered, "I have heard sounds. There are at least three men in the rocks watching us. Do not look up. Let us follow the caravan trail back toward the sheltered place where the tribes make

their camps. Then these men will talk to us.”

Lin Fong arose and took the lead, and they walked the path slowly, their feet crunching on the thick layer of dried camel dung that the ages had left upon it. They entered a slim aisle between sheer faces of brown rock marbled with white streaks. Lin Fong put a hand on the boy's shoulder, and glanced back at Ming. The gestures meant, “Be ready.” A glint of light off a rock face had told Lin Fong that someone with something metal was standing in the center of the path around the next corner.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Spirit of Genghis Khan

And there was something with metal there.

As it came into sight, a horse snorted and stamped, and the blinding flash of light struck K'ing's eyes, reflected off the chest of its rider.

This was a strange thing, from another age, that the trio beheld; a man sitting high on a thick-chested, pure black horse, whose nostrils flared and quivered, and whose spirited eyes flashed wildly at them. Its rider was dressed from head to toe in an ancient Chinese suit of armor. His left hand held the horse's reins. His right arm extended rigidly down to a clenched fist poised just over his right knee. In the fist was a short, heavy sword, which pointed up and out, forming a perfect V with the line of his arm. Its razor edges and needle tip glowed brightly in the sunlight. Beneath the crown of a heavy plumed helmet, a pair of dark eyes, framed by heavy black eyebrows and arching Mongol cheekbones, stared angrily out at them. Chong Fei K'ing had never seen anything like this, not even in books.

Lin Fong stopped, the boy and Ming a step behind him on either side, and looked up as though just mildly surprised. He gave a short nod of non-committal greeting. Then he folded his arms across his chest, and, putting his left foot just slightly forward, let his weight rest on his right. He gazed up and down at the spectacle rather curiously, as

one would look at a museum exhibit. K'ing could see traces of bushy black hair escaping from beneath the helmet. He was sure that notice of this had not escaped Ming.

The figure on the horse was still for a moment, and it was clear to K'ing that he expected these broken-down old men and this defenseless child to flee immediately at the mere sight of him.

Then, without warning, the sword flashed forward and pointed straight at Lin Fong's chest. A voice spoke from beneath the helmet: "This is a forbidden place! You must leave and come here no more!"

The dialect was strange; K'ing could barely follow it.

But Lin Fong knew the Mongolian dialect perfectly. Answering the horseman in kind, he said softly, "You are dressed up as Genghis Khan. But Genghis Khan has been dead for more than seven hundred years. So you are not Genghis Khan. But—neither you nor Genghis Khan himself could keep Lin Fong from walking this path if he chose. No man owns this desert, nor the Place of the Steep Rocks."

"Old man!" the voice from beneath the helmet thundered, "the Spirit of Genghis Khan lives in this place with many other warlike spirits; if you disturb them, the sword of the Mongol will tear you to pieces and carve out your heart!"

Lin Fong smiled with amusement, as one might smile at a child who had said something charming but ridiculous.

"I, Lin Fong, am a follower of the Tao. There are not many spirits, and there are no warlike spirits;

there is only one spirit, the Spirit of the Cosmos. I am not a superstitious old fool. What is here in the Place of the Steep Rocks that makes you want to keep an old man from it?"

The armor rattled, and the reins in the horse's mouth grew tight. The sword flashed as it raised high toward the sky.

K'ing could see Lin Fong's knees flexing as his curious museum pose turned imperceptibly into the Stance of the Cat. A gentle hand brushed against his robe, and another against Ming's, motioning them sideways and backwards.

Already too many words had been spoken.

The horse reared, and the rider threw his body forward onto its neck, and his spurs dug into the black stallion's sides. The chest of the huge beast surged into motion, and the sword plunged toward Lin Fong's chest.

K'ing dove behind a rock.

As the gleaming blade bounced toward Lin Fong on the horse's right side, the Master attacked; he launched out in a low, turning dive away from the horseman's sword hand, and toward the beast's oncoming hooves. Missing them by fractions of an inch, he seized the rider's left foot as it jounced in the stirrup, and yanked backwards.

The rider's face smashed down onto the horse's neck. He tried to hold on, but the horse kept running, and his legs split wide in his heavy suit of armor, until his foot yanked out of the other stirrup and he rolled over the horse's back, crashing heavily to the ground.

The sword flailed wildly, making hollow swooping

noises in the air as he scrambled hard to regain his footing.

There was a disturbance in the rocks above, and K'ing saw three men with sabres catapulting downward. Desperately the boy searched his mind for something he could do, but he knew that if either he or the old nomad tried to help, they would only get in the way.

The Spirit of Genghis Khan brought his sword down hard on the armor that covered his ankle, and K'ing shut his eyes to avert them from the horrible sight of his Master's hand being cut off. But no sooner had K'ing closed his eyes than they flashed open again; for he told himself, "These things which I am now seeing, I may some day have to do, and sooner or later I will have to face the sight of blood." So it was that he missed only the quick release of Lin Fong's hand from his adversary's ankle, and the sword starting to raise for a death-blow while the Mongol drew his free foot quickly back under him.

Now a lightning-kick erupted shoulder high, crashing into the swordsman's armored elbow, driving his arm up and back; and another kick sent a heel crashing into his opposite knee, tearing at the fibers of his struggling body. So fast did the blows fall that K'ing could not count them, until the sword flew from the hand, and a Monkey Blow caved in the side of the face, and Lin Fong, finding the weakness in his enemy's armor between the helmet and breastplate, delivered a clean, thrusting knife-point blow to the windpipe, smashing an Adam's apple and sending a doomed man staggering off to choke and drown in his own blood.

But even before the Spirit of Genghis Khan had

been laid to rest, the blade of a sabre was slicing through the air, as its wielder charged headlong at the whirling dervish in the long, flowing white robe.

But to Lin Fong, his death blow had been only a formality. Even before he had dealt it, his body had been moving to meet the new attack.

Now the sword's too-wide arc, and the swordsman's over-anxiousness for simple murder, proved fatal.

Lin Fong gauged the sweep of the sword-point, and sprang lightly leftward. The polished steel swished downward past him, parting the thin gauze of his robe, but leaving him untouched; and before the assassin could stop his charge and mount another attack, the hardened side of the Master's right hand chopped out in a backhand blow that caught a passing neckbone from the rear and snapped it with a shuddering shock; and a knee pounded upward into a vulnerable groin; and a lifeless body tumbled over it and fell heavily onto the sharp rocks. The sabre clattered off like an old piece of junk metal, ringing sharply on hard surfaces as it went.

There was no hesitation in the Master's dancing movements. The end of one blow had long been the beginning of another. It would be several years before Chong Fei K'ing would be able to fight this way: to plan the whole of a battle with a number of assailants from start to finish in an instant, as one would choreograph a dance, predicting their movements and yet allowing always for the totally unexpected.

As his first attacker slumped over his knee Lin Fong pirouetted as a ballet dancer on the ball of his

left foot. His right hand whipped like a branch in a wide sweep that met the midsection of the second assailant, and his head snapped backward out of the path of his downward-slashing sabre. His vulnerable head acted as a lure. But then the lure had disappeared, and there was only death left.

Lin Fong, in teaching K'ing the rudiments of Kung Fu, had shown him how to strike sharply with such hand blows and to pull back almost before they were delivered to prepare for defense or for another attack. But this time the Master's blow followed through as his right foot hooked delicately but firmly behind the legs of his adversary, and Lin threw the stunned body into that of the last attacker. As the dazed man fell to the ground and Lin Fong leapt over him, he almost absent-mindedly snapped the toe of his right foot up under his chin, cracking his head hard against the rocks and splitting it open.

Now Lin set upon his lone, last enemy in this brief struggle, and kicked and smashed him from so many angles at once that in an instant he had absorbed enough lethal blows to kill ten men. Blood welled in his mouth, staining the white of his teeth with surprised scarlet as he fell, the base of his spine thudding like a dropped piece of timber onto a brown boulder of granite.

Lin Fong stood absolutely motionless for perhaps two seconds. K'ing would soon learn that, after such an episode, Lin was at once listening for sounds of more trouble—in these situations he trusted his ears more than his eyes, for they could give him news at once from all directions—and also playing back to himself the feelings and the images of the previous moments.

Then Lin turned to them. "We must climb the rocks now," he said. "Here, as in aerial warfare, he who holds the heights has the advantage. We must be silent, and see what is really happening in this Place of the Steep Rocks." Quickly finding a trail, the three followed it until they saw a way to climb upward to the heights.

Just before they reached the top, they stopped to rest briefly. Lin Fong turned to K'ing. "If there is shooting with guns here, there will be no sand for you to bury yourself in. So you must do your best to hide in the rocks; perhaps you can find yourself a small cave. Do not worry about me. I do not feel that I will die here, but one never knows, especially when there are guns, which there are bound to be. But if I do die, do not linger with my body, wherever it lies. For whether I, Lin Fong, will somehow be conscious without my body, and be off to another world; or whether I am nothing but my body, and will become strewn through the dust and wind, and my parts will become one with the earth and sky and water; it will not matter. For I have spent a long time staring at this desert, and now I am ready, if I run into bad luck, to be part of it."

The boy was alive to the atmosphere of hate and death all around them, and had to force himself to listen to the Master's words. But Lin Fong was not finished.

"Chong Fei K'ing," Lin said to him, as if hurriedly to tell him something he should know in case the Master would not have another chance to impart it: "I will not know until I have died what death is; but I do know that, even at your age, you must strive to be at peace with the unknown future. For the peace of the Tao is the peace of a man for whom

death is welcomed into life as part of it, whatever death may be."

Now the trio gained the heights, and crept behind a rock whose long, level, gray top would have seemed, in less dangerous times, like a balcony. It served them as a parapet. Lin Fong peered over it.

Directly below, in a large hollow among fifty-foot cliffs that were broken by entrances only to the north and south, lay three buildings, newly constructed. Their walls were mortared rock, and their heavily timbered roofs were dappled with camouflage paint. There was a large one whose rear butted up against the cliffs to the east, and whose boarded front porch looked out on the trail that cut through the valley's middle; a smaller one, perhaps thirty feet to the south of it; and another one across the trail, a little further south, in front of which a dozen camels, most of them pack animals fitted out as ordinary nomad beasts, were tied to a long rail. Their drivers sat around a fire in the thirty foot space between the buildings.

But these were no ordinary camel drivers, these dozen men who lay about napping or talking or dredging up food from a huge iron caldron that sat by the side of the fire; for Lin Fong could see even through their clothing that their bodies were hard and strong and young, and their faces were dark and squinting with ruthlessness.

And all about them lay guns: high-powered rifles, pistols and shoulder holsters, and submachine guns.

At the edge of the group stood a thickset monster of a man, dressed in a black tunic of silk that shone with orange sequins in intricate design:

obviously the leader. Standing slightly behind him at his sides were what Lin assumed to be his bodyguards. Although they wore pistols at their hips and cradled high-powered rifles in their arms, Lin could tell from their short, belted white robes, and loose, short white pants, that their final resort would be to judo. And if they were here, they must be Masters.

As he reported these findings to his two companions, Lin Fong was certain that, as yet at least, he had not been spotted.

Now he left the old nomad and the young boy in each other's care, and made his way first east, then south, and finally west again, sneaking up through the rocks until he had reached a point twenty feet above the rear of the main building. Now that the sides of the structures were fully in view, he was not surprised to see that they were windowless and completely sealed off except for a few cracks in the mortar through which gun muzzles could fit.

Lin Fong was surprised that no one had yet run across the bodies of his earlier victims and sounded the alarm. For such an elaborate setup, whose purpose he still had not stopped to question, surely the Place of the Steep Rocks would be ringed with armed sentries patrolling regularly. He guessed there would be at least a half a dozen of these.

The Master did not wait for the alarm to be sounded. He could have slipped away, but there was no hope of escaping into the desert with an old nomad and a young boy. These people with their camels would surely find them, and they would be easy prey. The only way to get out was to go in.

The decision took no more than a second. Lin

leapt out away from the cliff, and, staring in his silent flight to see whether he was being sighted over the edge of the roof, collapsed into a small, almost invisible heap on the camouflage paint. Then he scuttled across it, gained its edge, and leapt.

To Lin Fong, who now flew through the air toward an impossible fight, and even as he went prepared to lash out with kicks and blows that would strike before he landed, there was never more than one body fighting him, whether he was fighting one person or a body of people. This was a very large body into which he now descended. It would surround him. In fact, it would engulf him. But it was no matter. He was on the way.

Ni-Tang Chang, standing between his two huge Japanese bodyguards surveying his operation with supreme confidence in the impregnability of his fortress, suddenly saw a flash of white cloth catapulting past his head; and before he or anyone else in the tiny area could realize that they were in trouble, Lin Fong's feet, held tightly together, had bashed in the skull and broken the neck of the leader of his caravan, and his left hand had knifed in to spear the throat of a driver as he turned.

Screeches and cries erupted in the mad scrambling as Lin Fong dropped, rolling, to the ground, and lashed out with a lightning kick that met a groin.

He sprang sideways to kick in the backbone of a man who scrambled wildly for a gun.

Chang's bodyguards jumped their rifles to their shoulders.

But Lin Fong had foreseen this, and, presenting

a target almost impossible for the bulky weapons to follow at such close range as he whirled and dove and leapt and struck, being careful to use the scrambling, panicked enemies as screens, he kicked a rifle behind the huge cauldron by the side of the fire then dove behind it himself.

The cauldron did not cover his body completely, and a bullet grazed his calf, as many more clanged into the cauldron, making it jump and wobble and inch back toward him.

But when he pointed the barrel of the rifle over the top of the cauldron and fired several random shots from the semi-automatic weapon toward where Chang and his bodyguards stood, they dove behind them into a side door of the main building and slammed it shut.

Lin leapt up, firing from the waist, cutting down first those who had raised guns nearly high enough to fire at him.

Then he dove for the thick, metal-plated side door, making it impossible for those inside to train their weapons on him through the thin muzzle slits in the mortar.

His weapon blazing, he put an end to all life within gun range.

Now, the world's greatest Master of weaponless fighting had gained a short instant in which to think and plan.

This was not the first time he had used a gun. As he had told his young protege, "Weapons are evil. Their only purpose is for violence, and with weapons one may kill without looking into the eyes of one's victim. Remember this: it is very important. If one is to kill, one must ask oneself, 'Could I look

into the eyes of this person who is to die at my hands?' If the answer is 'No,' then one may have fallen heir to the greatest burden a man's soul can carry. Of course, even if one can answer 'Yes,' that still does not mean the killing was justified..." But on the other hand, there was no mystique about weapons for this Master of weaponless combat. For him, they were merely extensions of the body. The high-powered rifle worked like a knife-point blow at long range. The bomb worked like a hammer-blow. And in his time, Lin Fong had been called upon to use many weapons.

Suddenly his super-sensitive ears, which had been ignoring the commotion behind the metal door at his back, and listening for sounds of outlying sentries closing in, picked up a tiny, creeping noise from the cliffs above the building behind him.

It came again, and when he had firmly fixed in his mind the direction of its source, he leapt suddenly out from the partial shelter of the building wall into the open, staring his adversary straight in the face.

With the smoothness of an arrow that flies through the air and suddenly stops dead, embedded in a tree, Lin Fong swung the rifle until the sentry's chest slammed into focus between the crosshairs.

There was no worry whether the man who tracked Lin with his own rifle would squeeze his deadly trigger first. Such worry would only interfere with the concentration needed for shooting. Lin had been taught from infancy by his own Master to block out all doubts that might hinder the directness of his attacks.

Perhaps this was why he firmly squeezed the trigger of his rifle and sent a soft-nosed slug crashing into the sentry's head a half a second—a half a second that amounted to an eternity—before another finger could pull another trigger.

The body slammed against the cliff wall as though it had been hit by a train, and then crumpled, a small hole in its forehead, the back of its head blown out.

The hot rocks dripped with rapidly darkening splashes of blood that flowed between white, jellied bits of brain.

As Lin Fong first raked the side of the building with fire to force back the muzzles that now began to poke out at him, and then regained the safety of the door, Chong Fei K'ing watched from high above.

The boy felt the surge of his father's blood in his veins. He found himself breathing deeply, and his tiny limbs became impatient.

It was true, Lin Fong had told him to hide.

It was also true that the Master had put to rest one armored man on horseback, three men wielding sabres, a dozen murderous camel drivers, and one sentry with a high-powered rifle.

But even K'ing's inexperienced mind realized that, as Lin also knew, there would be outlying sentries guarding the distant approaches to the Place of the Steep Rocks who would now be closing in on the battle scene. And then there were the men who were left in the main building below.

The boy thought to himself, "Lin Fong has told me to hide because he does not want me to be killed. But he has also said that if I am to become a

Master, I must not fear death. Must I wait until I become a Master of Kung Fu before I stop fearing death?

“Some day I will die, that is certain; and whether or not there is anything to be feared from death, what does it matter, compared to the length of all eternity, whether I die today, or in seventy years?”

He meditated briefly on these things, and then he thought, “Lin Fong has told me to hide myself... But there are many men seeking to kill Lin Fong, and if he dies, Ton Te Ming and I will be on our own in this den of murderers.”

The phrase “on our own” struck him forcibly. If Lin Fong were to die, why then, would not Chong Fei K'ing suddenly have to become his own Master? He could never be such a Master to himself as Lin Fong was to him, but he would have to make do as best he could.

Coming suddenly to a decision, the boy tapped Ton Te Ming on the shoulder. “I am going,” he said.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Killing of Sasho Yakai

The old nomad felt that he should restrain the boy; but so great was his awe of Lin Fong, the protector of the nomads, and of anyone who stood near him, that he looked upon Chong Fei K'ing almost as a god. And besides, there was a depth, a finality, deep in the clear blue eyes of the Master's young protege that told this old patriarch of the desert that his efforts would be of no avail. He nodded fatalistically.

K'ing made his way among the cliffs to the place where the dead sentry lay.

He shuddered at the gore and the blood.

Then he looked abstractly at the high-powered rifle that lay still gripped in the hands of the dead man.

Lin Fong had told him how guns worked. He knew that with this one, you had to look through the tube with glass at either end that was mounted over the barrel in order to find what you wanted the bullet to hit. He had been told how some guns were loaded, but not this one.

Gingerly he tugged the complicated mechanism of metal and wood from the dead man's grasp and lifted it to rest on his lap.

It took him perhaps thirty seconds to see how the long, curving clip of ammunition fit into the slot beneath the barrel, and he took it out and replaced

it once or twice. Then, searching the pouch at the dead man's waist, he retrieved several more such clips and put in a fresh one.

The words of Lin Fong echoed in his ears: "With a weapon you may kill someone without looking into his eyes." But the boy remembered that the question that decided whether or not one should kill in this way was not, "Can you look into his eyes?" It was "Could you look into his eyes, if you were there to do it?"

Chong Fei K'ing did not as yet have any thorough idea about what death was, but he had seen men die that day, and he had seen them try to kill Lin Fong. He thought to himself, "If this is what death is, then surely I could look into the eyes of these murderers as they died?" And besides, Lin Fong had shot this very man whose rifle he now had.

Lin Fong had told him that weapons were used by the same rules as the body was used in Kung Fu, and that he was learning Kung Fu and not the use of weapons first because weapons were a temptation to careless killing, but second because the human body itself was the most complicated of all things, and if you could learn to use your body then you would know how to use simpler things like guns and knives if the necessity arose.

K'ing looked down to see Lin Fong throw his rifle on to the top of the building and then vault up after it.

As the Master moved toward the building's front, and the roof of a porch held up by heavy timbers, K'ing scampered away through the rocks with his new-found weapon, moving northward and downward until he had reached the valley floor.

Then, still keeping hidden among the huge boulders that littered it, he crawled and ran eastward until he found a hiding place behind a rock about fifty yards across from the building's front door.

Lin Fong heard noises among the rocks. He lifted his rifle.

But he could see no target.

Then, he saw, from the northern and southern ends of the valley, groups of men darting back and forth toward him.

The outlying sentries had grouped at the valley's ends, and were closing in.

The sage could now see that the crisis point in the battle had been reached, the point at which there could be no thinking or planning, but only continuous, single-minded, dancing action. There were heavily armed men in the building beneath him. There were half a dozen men converging on him from north and south.

He was trapped.

He leapt down from the roof and poured slugs into the jamb of the front door, blasting away at the timbers, shattering the inside bolt, and blowing it open.

Then he raced to the side of the house, stopping to rip an ammunition pouch from a dead man and jam a fresh clip into his weapon. He shoved the muzzle into one of the chinks in the mortar and raked the interior.

Shots were already ringing off the stone walls from the converging sentries as Lin, in a shower of lead and rock-splinters, raced to the front of the building again.

His back to the wall, he inched up to where a gun muzzle was beginning to point, and a pair of eyes were beginning to peek, out of the front door.

Putting down his weapon softly, he lunged into the aperture.

He caught the gun muzzle in his powerful fingers and forced it upward. He kept the body of the huge Japanese between himself and those in the almost pitch black interior.

Streams of gunfire poured out. Those inside were desperate. Ni-Tang Chang, his submachine gun at his hip, gladly sacrificed the life of his bodyguard in the hope that he would at the same time cut down this seemingly all-powerful attacker.

But so quickly did Lin Fong, his hands still grasping the muzzle of the giant's submachine gun, whirl away and dive inside, that only one of the many bullets that tore through the giant's body touched him with its largely spent impact, and that harmlessly grazed his thigh.

Lin Fong heard a shuffling toward the far end of the room, and breathing from across it, as he looked up to find himself under a huge table covered with jute bundles.

For an instant there was a stand-off; his adversaries did not want to reveal their locations with muzzle flashes until they could be certain of their target.

The packages on the tables above Lin Fong were wrapped with twine. Breaking loose several long pieces, he quickly lashed his weapon to a table leg, and then tied one end of a ten-foot piece in a loop around the trigger. To cover the sounds, he threw a package down along a wall, and drew a burst of fire

from a far end of the room. Then, holding an end of string in his hand, he silently crept forward beneath the table toward where he believed his closest adversary to be.

Soon he could hear breathing sounds as he stifled his own breath and drew upon his inner strength to sustain him.

He yanked the cord.

Bullets shot wildly out of the gun behind him as it chattered away against the table leg. Immediately a thickset figure rose and blasted away at his decoy. Lin lunged forward, found a pair of legs in the darkness, and tackled them, snapping the massive body above into another table so hard that a spine cracked.

Lin's eyes fastened upon a new weapon which now lay at his feet, but his instinct told him to spring over another of the tables. His arching dive carried him onto the back of a monstrous bodyguard, whose gun swung to meet the attack a fraction of a second too late. The Master's left hand grasped its muzzle and twisted it, turning against a thumb, and his right slashed down hard for the killing blow.

But although the gun came free and dropped to the floor, the giant's head shot backward, and Lin's chopping hand, instead of hitting his skull at an angle which would have sent shock waves to its opposite side and fractured it, hit at a slightly different, non-lethal angle. Lin instantly sensed that his adversary, far larger and far more powerful, skilled enough to evade a deadly and unexpected Karate blow, was more than a ruthless killer: he was—physically at least—a Master.

His Japanese opponent, fear in his heart at having so narrowly, escaped such a masterful stroke, reeled a step backward.

There was a sudden, chilling freeze. The two men stared at each other in the faint light that filtered through a nearby wall. Instinctively Lin Fong moved to the Stance of the Cat as he took in the Japanese's heavily calloused, massive right hand. Almost as quickly his adversary assumed a Horse Stance, and glowered at him murderously. His low voice blasted the silence away: "I am Sasho Yakai," he bellowed.

Lin Fong's eyes narrowed into a hard, ruthless grin. "And I," he said, "am Lin Fong."

Lin's penetrating gaze detected the slightest quivering in the immense bare muscles of the man's huge forearms. If Sasho Yakai was indeed a master of Karate, he knew the name of Lin Fong.

There was not an unhumble bone in all of Lin's body, but the sage was not averse to using his reputation as a weapon against a man forty years younger. He smiled, all emotion whirling away in the vortex of his thought as he dove deeply for the strength of the Tao. Then: "A violent man shall die a violent death. This is the essence of the teaching."

The salutations were over. Sasho stepped forward in short, chopping, balanced steps, his fists clenched tightly at his sides.

Lin Fong's eyes seized the whole of his hulking form, instantly surveying the structure of its muscles and its balance. In less than a second, he had launched into a combination of a dozen moves which would mean certain death for his rival.

Faking a slashing blow with his upraised right

hand, he drew the first motion of a Whipping Branch parry from Sasho's left, and set himself to counter either the right-handed Ram's Head punch, or the left-footed Dragon Stamp kick. When the Ram's Head came at him straight and hard, his Leaping Deer block sent it harmlessly upward, and his knees flexed as he dropped to a semi-crouch.

A left-handed Knife-Point flashed toward his midsection. He smashed it with a sharp Monkey Blow, and the hand pulled back, a finger bent and broken.

A Raised-Hoof kick, just a flash quicker than Lin had expected, missed his groin but caught his thigh. Sasho's foot had moved so fast that it had been all but invisible. But they were fighting a fight of invisible speed, and although Lin Fong's leg buckled slightly, he was impervious to the waves of pain that emanated from it; they were diverted and dissolved, and suddenly the Master felt an overpowering surge of white-hot fury. Already his iron right hand had clamped down on Sasho's kicking foot and thrust upward, setting up the subtle rhythm of imbalance that he sought. Sasho's countermove was too conventional; a slashing left hand that sought to cut Lin's wrist.

And that was the error that killed Sasho Yakai.

For the Master had not meant, as Sasho thought, to throw him over backward. Lin Fong had patience, and like a chess player, his body planned each move far in advance. Lin had noticed the slightest imperfection in Sasho's original stance; it took eyes that could bore into the grains of a railroad tie, and pave the way for a hand to break it, to see Sasho leaning a fraction of an inch too far forward. Only Lin Fong could dog the trail of such a

minute imperfection through the desperation of a hand-to-hand, life and death struggle, magnifying it little by little until it meant his enemy's death.

Now the forward motion of Sasho's left-hand smash overcompensated for the imbalance that Lin had created by throwing him slightly backward, and brought his center of gravity fully half an inch further forward that it should have been.

For a flash his left side was open.

Lin Fong ignored the opening, knowing that Sasho had already felt it and was moving to cover it. Letting Sasho defend against a blow he had never intended, Lin saw that only one more quick diversion was needed to set up a good death-shot at this formidable adversary. He faked an Elephant Kick, his right knee jabbing shortly but convincingly toward Sasho's groin; and now the huge body, although on the surface solidly positioned, was deep down to its spine swaying like a tree about to fall.

A left-handed Tiger Claw streaked in to rake Sasho's face.

A left foot flashed in behind his right to make his retreat into a tiny stumble.

Then the right hand of the Master, fingertips as hard as a lance, darted in, spearing Sasho's solar plexus.

Half-blinded, his nervous system short-circuited to the point of breakdown,, Sasho's arms and legs lashed out wildly: he was a deadly fighter even though himself half-dead. Lin Fong shot in through the maze of disorganized but lethal blows to deliver his favorite, supremely deadly Knife-Point to the throat, and it was over.

Outside, Chong Fei K'ing had watched his Master disappear into the foreboding front door of the low stone and wood structure that sat in the placid heat perhaps a hundred yards from him. He had heard bursts of gunfire from within, and then there had been what seemed to him like an interminable silence of perhaps three minutes.

Now the boy watched closely as the sentries wound their cautious way up the trail from either end of the valley and came within fifty yards of the building. In moments they would be bursting into the shelter in which Lin Fong—if he was still alive—waited alone. Balancing the rifle on a rock before him, placing its butt up against his shoulder, and instinctively steadying the stock with his left hand as his right found the trigger, he looked through the scope.

It was very simple. All one had to do was put these thin crossed lines on the glass up against one of the running figures, and then make the gun shoot.

He caught a figure in his sights. But then thought, "No, I will wait until they have almost reached the door. That way there will be no place for them to run when I begin shooting, and none of them will be able to run around behind me."

Neither Lin Fong nor Chong Fei K'ing had thought about the broken old nomad they had left quivering in the shelter of the high rocks. But Ton Te Ming, perhaps shamed by the bravery of Lin Fong's young protege, or perhaps surprised by the thought that someone so all-powerful as Lin Fong might actually need help, had gradually found his own way downward. He had watched K'ing at first puzzle over the rifle, and finally aim it. He

remembered the Master's concern for the safety of this naive child, and thought he could do no better than protect the boy's rear as best he could. Armed with no more than an old skinning knife which had stayed, all but forgotten, in its sheath at his belt, crawling inch by inch, he came up behind Chong Fei K'ing, stopping about fifty yards away. Now he crawled to the invisible safety of the split in a large rock from which he could look out at the boy and up the valley toward anyone who might come at him from the rear. There, he waited.

Lin Fong was not idle during his few minutes of respite inside the building. He tore the jute covering from one of the hundreds of bundles, and inside he found many lengths of beautiful, raw Thai silk. In the center of the package, he found a large carved wooden Buddha. A smash of his hand shattered it, and white powder spewed forth. Opium.

It was no surprise. But it was bad news. These smugglers, with their heavily fortified camp, could only be part of some huge smuggling network, and to attack part of that network was to attack all of it. He supposed that, if he and the old Nomad and the young boy managed to escape, leaving no one alive who had seen their faces, it might be a long time before the leaders of the ring suspected that the attack had not come from agents of some government—China's, or the government of some country for which the opium was bound—or from some rival ring. But they had their ways, and sooner or later they would find out, and then they would come to murder Lin Fong and anyone who was with him.

Curious now, Lin used valuable seconds moving to the dead body of the thick-set man whose spine

he had cracked. He glanced at the face.

Ni-Tang Chang. Lin Fong had fought him and a number of his henchmen once in Shanghai, and had let him live. Perhaps it had been a mistake, for Ni-Tang Chang was a lieutenant of an ancient Tong that long ago had split off from the other Tongs to become one of China's most powerful crime syndicates. Lin Fong now realized that he had attacked an organization with a subterranean army that would have put many of China's War Lords to shame.

Then there was a pounding on the porch, and the Master was not ready.

Briefly he wondered, as he scrambled for a gun, whether he would now pay for his moment of curiosity with his life.

There were five of them, rushing from the sunlight upon the building's wide open door; two sub-machine guns and three rifles, all talking. Lin Fong wasn't one to sit around watching the action, but in this case he had no choice. It was over before he could get off a shot.

Chong Fei K'ing, huddled in the rocks with his unfamiliar weapon at his shoulder, had done what everyone does who first fires a rifle; he had pulled the trigger instead of squeezing. His shot had gone high. It had caught the lead sentry in the shoulder instead of in the midsection.

K'ing had felt the rifle jerk in his hands just as the shot was fired, and he said to himself, "This thing must remain still as I work it. My hands must be very smooth. It must be as if nothing at all has happened but the firing pin meeting the back of the shell." So, aiming again two seconds later, picking

out a target from among the group as it panicked at being caught in a cross fire, he gently squeezed off a round.

He was staring through the scope, trying to see whether his shot had found its mark; but this time in his gentle squeezing of the trigger he had continued to hold it down, and to his surprise, the semi-automatic weapon continued firing. "This is a very easy thing," he said to himself, as the bullets hammered out in a steady stream and he swung the scope from target to fleeing target. The weapon had a tendency to climb into the air, and now K'ing made his bursts shorter. Between them, he rammed in fresh clips of ammunition.

"This is so easy—I see now why Lin Fong told me that I must ask myself questions before I use such a thing."

From then on, as the figures continued to fall and a few stray bullets whizzed past his ears, he asked with each new body that came between the crosshairs, "Could I now look this man in the eyes?"

Yes!

Yes!

Yes!

Now Lin Fong himself was firing out through the chinks in the wall of the building, finishing up the work that his young protege had started.

Chong Fei K'ing felt a rising of the hairs on the back of his neck.

Suddenly, from fifty yards behind him, there was a solid crack of a single shot and a piercing scream.

The boy dove sideways. A bullet smashed into

the rock which had sheltered him, sending hot slivers jabbing into his thigh.

A quick, electric wave of pain speared through him, and he thought, "I have been shot."

But then he looked down at his leg, lifting his robe to examine the flesh. There were only a few small bright red marks, with the tiniest bit of blood oozing up out of them. He moved the limb. It still worked.

The valley was still. K'ing looked up over his rock. Behind him, he saw a last lone sentry slumped over a rock, and Ton Te Ming, shivering slightly but smiling broadly, rising up from over his dead body, his knife bloody in his hand.

The battle was over.

From inside the building, Lin Fong peeked out to see the boarded porch in front, and the dusty ground beyond, littered with lifeless bodies. Not far away, a dozen camels still gnashed their teeth, and kicked and yanked at their ropes.

The Master emerged onto the porch.

There was the slightest movement to his left. He swiveled his gun to meet it.

The camel driver K'ing had winged with his first shot was stirring. Blood was flowing from a wide wound just below a collar bone, which had been shot away. Lin walked over to the man and snatched a knife from his belt. Then, stripping off his shirt, he stuffed it into the gaping wound. By this time the old nomad and the boy were at his side.

"We have a problem," the sage said. "This man who is living; we cannot kill him now, nor leave him

here to die. We must try to save him. But if he lives, then he will know who we are, and these smugglers—for that is what they are, opium smugglers—have a strong hold upon him. If he goes from us, he will not escape them, as far as he may run. He will have to tell them who we are. But still, we must try to save him.” Looking down at the now unconscious body, he was unsure whether this was possible, but he would try.

The Master turned back to the main building, its grey stones and brown camouflage-painted roof now seeming altogether innocent in the clear, unthreatening light of the desert morning.

But, remembering what was inside it, he felt a sudden burst of rage. Throwing his weapon to the ground, he attacked one of the huge columns that supported the front porch with the hardened edge of his right hand. Slashing again and again, as a man would slash a tree with an axe, he sent angry sounds snapping like a pack of mad dogs down between the valley's silent spires of rock.

Six, seven, eight blows, and the wood groaned and shuddered.

Then the corner support buckled and broke, and the roof above it came thundering down, spewing stones from the top of the wall beneath it out over the corpses and yellow-red dust and camel dung and bits of straw.

Lin Fong stormed into the building, overturning tables, casting packages of silk and wooden figures and opium all about. Finding a lantern, he emptied its oil onto one of the tables and lit it.

A muffled explosion of sunset orange flamed in the darkness, and jute and silk and wood caught

fire. In seconds, the flames were searing at the heavy timbers of the roof.

A tall column of smoke arose, a dense black smudge in the otherwise crystalline air.

He repeated this performance at the two other buildings. Then, hurriedly fetching four camels and setting the rest free, he lashed the wounded enemy across one of the saddles.

They set out.

As the camels smoothly left the valley behind, Lin Fong reached back to throw a blanket over the body that balanced on the saddle of the camel beside him, keeping the sun from its flesh, and at the same time making it look like any other burden that a pack beast might carry. With the Master already beginning to explain to Chong Fei K'ing what opium was and how smugglers worked, with all of them glancing anxiously and often over their shoulders, they set out for home.

CHAPTER SIX

Kak Nan Tang

The day went, and the sun sank out of the sky, as three figures rode their fugitive camels across the hot wasteland. A fourth beast trailed behind them, drying trickles of blood dribbling down its sides, leaving a broken trail of crimson in the dusty powder.

Lin Fong, despite the danger that a new caravan of smugglers would arrive at The Place of the Steep Rocks immediately after they had left, and even now might be making wide circles in the desert searching for them, insisted on making frequent stops to readjust the bandages on the maimed body and to spurt water onto the unconscious man's cracking lips. The boy never questioned that this should be done; but as he turned over Lin Fong's account of the evil which had befallen the tribe of Ton Te Ming, and now realized that his isolated desert world could at any moment be punctured by shafts of vengeance reaching it from as far away as Shanghai or Hong Kong or the opium fields of Indochina, he wondered greatly about the world that lay so far beyond him, and about how such evil could have come to be in it.

Now he ran over Lin Fong's explanation of opium for the hundredth time. He had no difficulty in seeing that if a person in some country wanted opium very badly, and if the government of his country did not allow its people to have this opium,

then those who wanted it would have to pay highly for the services of those who brought it to them. Neither did he have difficulty seeing that the greed of these people for money would lead them to risk spending their lives in prisons, or perhaps even losing them. And from there, it was not difficult to see how they could bring themselves to kill to keep this from happening.

What K'ing did not understand was why anyone would want the opium in the first place. For, in explaining to the boy how opium was obtained from the flower called the poppy, Lin had said, "The opium poppy has been made by men into a symbol of the evil which may be drawn out of the good in this world; of the ugliness which may be distilled from the beautiful. For when the milky juice is taken from the unripe capsules below its flower, and dried in the air, and then eaten or smoked in a pipe, it produces in a person's mind a counterfeit of the peace of the Tao. The danger is this; every man longs for the peace that comes from losing the fear of his own death. You have already felt such peace in your meditations. And having found that peace, you will want to meditate again. So the opium smoker finds that he will want his peace again.

"But you, when you meditate, learn well the road to and from mindlessness, and can find your way back again from it in a flash, or can dwell in it as long as you wish. For he who has found the Way knows it with the most perfect of all knowledge, since he has made it. But the opium smoker knows not how to attain his peace without an earthly substance. Thus he depends upon things of this earth to make him forget that he is of this earth. He has not stared into the Void, but rather has turned

his back upon it, setting earthly substance against earthly substance in a manner which traps him in his body. He does not know how to attain this peace without this earthly substance. Thus he does not have the strength that comes from knowledge, but the weakness that comes from flight.

"Deep in his heart, the opium smoker knows he has done this: but once he has felt his counterfeit joy, he has sold his soul to his body, and his body to his opium, and again and again he must turn to it, to keep from the hard task of facing the truth.

"He is in bondage to a substance which he cannot take with him at the hour of his death.

"Then the fear which has made him do this sets his soul against itself, and keeps him from passing peacefully into the final rest of the Tao. For to the end, his body will cry out in the manner in which he has taught it to cry out, and the fear which he has buried will well up out of him with increasing strength as he sees what he has lost. And again he will bury it more deeply with opium. And again it will strike back up at him with vengeance. Until at last he will take too much opium and it will kill him.

"He will not have gone out to meet death face to face; it will have come upon him from behind. And if there is any death which is final, it is such a death."

K'ing asked Lin Fong whether he himself had ever smoked opium.

"Yes," Lin said.

"It is best not to. But I was young, and eager to experience everything. Fortunately, after much deep meditation, the effects of opium are a trivial

thing. The poppy does nothing to your mind which you could not do to it yourself if you wished."

This was what K'ing could not understand; why anyone should depend on a substance to do for him what, if he wished, he could do for himself.

He put aside these thoughts when, a while later, Lin Fong announced that the wounded man was dead.

As they buried the body in the sifting Gobi sands, Lin wondered aloud whether his chances of living would have been better if they had left him in the Place of the Steep Rocks. He did not seem to take into account that, had the man stayed and lived, revenge would have descended upon them with shuddering swiftness. K'ing asked the Master about this.

"You and I have already made our peace with the Cosmos," he said. "But I do not believe this man had."

After the body had been covered, Lin stood for several minutes gazing pensively at the tiny swirls of sand that the wind moved over it. Then he mounted his camel again, and they moved on.

They reached home just before sunrise, with K'ing asleep, tied to the saddle of his camel. Ton Te Ming was a nodding picture of exhaustion. Lin Fong, however, had long perfected a technique of meditation which allowed him to rest both mind and body while he performed certain minimal functions, such as camel-riding. Now he was as awake and alert as ever.

They found Sui-ding buried under a pile of boards beneath the house. She was healthy and well, but had gone into hiding at the approach of

their small caravan. Even after their voices from above reassured her, and even after she saw her grandfather staring down into the pit, smiling at her tiny form, her eyes grew wide; for her grandfather's head had been shaved, and his thin, weathered face had a strange and discomfoting appearance.

The little girl was filthy with desert grime that had made a gray paste out of her sweat and tears. Her fine, silky black hair was matted and caked. After a few minutes, her grandfather, temporarily revived with the joy of retrieving her, carried her out to the wooden washing tub beside the well.

When they were gone, Lin turned immediately to K'ing. The boy felt he had suddenly grown into a man as the Master said, "We must get rid of these camels. For if the smugglers come here and find them, we will all be shot. I would like you to ride one of them, and lead the rest, a day's journey to the north. By tomorrow morning, you should arrive at the Spring Where the Water Oozes Slowly. You remember the place?"

K'ing nodded.

"There you should release the camels and return. It would be best to walk first half a day eastward, so that you may sleep at night without danger."

Lin Fong looked at him questioningly, as if asking whether he was willing to take this responsibility and whether he approved of the plan.

K'ing was not used to being asked for his assent, and he responded slowly but firmly.

The Master's face broke into a smile. He placed his hand fondly on the boy's shoulder as they walked outside to tie the camels together. As K'ing

rapped the knees of the lead beast with a stick and watched it descend, Lin said, "I will see you in three days. By then it will not be long before your new companion arrives. When he does, a whole new life will start for you."

The boy mounted the lead camel as the Master continued: "This is a difficult and dangerous thing. If anyone comes across you and asks where you got these camels, or what you are doing with them, you must tell them you are taking them to Mandal Gobi for your father, who is selling them to Idrish Mon. He is a powerful man there, and this will help you.

"If they are suspicious, or if you are followed, you must ride all the way to Mandal Gobi, and there seek out Idrish Mon. Tell him that Lin Fong has sent him these camels. When you are alone with him, you may tell him the whole story, and make sure he tells everyone he has bought them from some man he knows in China.

"This man is an old friend of mine and you may trust him with your life."

Then the Master had another thought.

"If ever you need help in this world, this man will give it to you."

K'ing wondered at this: for Lin Fong had as much as said, "If I should die..."

While Lin Fong had been speaking, K'ing had been aware that Ton Te Ming had filled the bath tub and was taking off Sui-ding's robe to put her in it. He looked straight at the Master and recorded his instructions well enough, but he found himself wanting to observe the activities at the well. For he knew that some day he would grow into a man, and Sui-ding into a woman, and he had heard many

tales about something called love between men and women. The idea that women were somehow opposite to men intrigued him; he had often wondered why every child had to have both a mother and a father.

Now he was curious to see Sui-ding without her clothes on; for he knew that everyone wore clothes, and that one was not supposed to remove one's clothes in public. When he had a chance, he glanced over at Sui-ding's tiny, naked body. He was shocked to see that beneath her small, slightly protruding belly, between her skinny, slightly bowed legs, there was nothing where there ought to have been something. But some deeply buried instinct told him not to stare at Sui-ding in the presence of her grandfather or Lin Fong, and not to ask about it at the time. Perhaps he would ask when Lin told him and his new companion the story of their mothers.

The Master, lost in his own thoughts, gave the boy a long look, as if to see whether he had been visibly changed by the battle at the Place of the Steep Rocks, and especially by having, at his young age, already killed and faced death. He well knew that, had he chosen, he could have left the boy at home with Sui-ding. But he was not afraid that the Son of the Flying Tiger would grow up too quickly.

And further, although the boy had experienced little, he had heard about and imagined much. Lin had told him many vivid stories, and had read him many more; and with each one, he had been careful to liken things that he was so meticulously describing to the surprisingly large number of things around their desert house which could be used for such comparisons. For instance, he had

said, "The barrel of a gun is metal, like the hinge on this trunk. But it is long and hollow." He had drawn a picture. Then, "We will wait until sunset, and I will pick out for you from the sky the color of gray-blue that its metal is." By this process, the child had been able to build an imaginary world which in many respects very closely resembled the world he would soon be experiencing. But while most children, including the boy who was soon to be K'ing's companion, were born into worlds of bewildering complexity, and from the first were forced to sort out from the many things around them those they wished to understand, this boy had the world outside the desert filtered through his own imagination, layer by layer, in an order which Lin Fong thought reflected the importance of its aspects.

So it was that, although there were many things which were common to the ordinary child of which K'ing had no knowledge, there were other, more profound things with which the boy had the most immediate acquaintance—such as the difference between good and evil, and perhaps even the Tao itself, of which it has been said, "The Way that can be trodden is not the timeless Way." So it was that K'ing, at his young age, was at once the oldest of men and the youngest of children. For it was not until after he had grasped these more profound things that he had come to learn how a book worked or how to fight Kung Fu style; and it was even later that Lin described to him cities and wars and farming and famous men. The child's desert world was bleak, and so he lived in his extraordinary imagination the stories and situations described to him by his Master.

Now Lin realized that, having heard so many descriptions of war and killing, it was as though the boy had lived through these things himself. The Master saw that K'ing had not really faced the prospects of killing and dying only the day before. He had faced them many months before, and had faced them over and over.

The Master held his hand up in parting, as if to say, "You are a man now, and you can take care of yourself. I will see you when you return." Then he gave K'ing's camel a slap, and sent him off on his mission.

K'ing could not resist glancing back over his shoulder as he went, and, past Lin Fong's retreating form, he saw Ton Te Ming pulling his granddaughter out of the tub. As if to confirm his earlier astounding finding, he stared once more between her legs. There seemed to be a tiny crease there, atop a slight bulge.

Then Sui-ding, perhaps sensing that she was being watched, stared up at him.

He turned his head and kicked his camel.

K'ing reached the place that Lin Fong had spoken of easily, and let the camels go. He was sorry that no one had asked him any questions or followed him. He would have liked to go to Mandal Gobi and to meet Idrish Mon.

On the way home, he was assaulted by a vicious sandstorm which at times buried him almost to his knees, and lashed the sand so furiously into his face that he had difficulty breathing even though he held the cloth of his robe over his mouth.

By the time he returned to the house of Lin Fong, it was as peaceful and silent as ever, and the

Master was sitting cross-legged in his rickety tower, gazing off into nothingness.

K'ing spent the next few days practicing Kung Fu forms by himself, and mulling over both the events at the Place of the Steep Rocks and the remarkable difference between Ton Te Ming's granddaughter and himself. In his daily meditations, he sometimes found himself disturbed by his memory of Sui-ding, and resolved to ask Lin Fong whether such memories were to be welcomed and meditated upon, as for instance the sound of a bell, or whether such meditation would make him more dependent upon earthly things, and he should whirl them away into the well of mindlessness.

The sun rose and set five times, and then, in the middle of the sixth day, Lin Fong, who usually ended his periods of meditation at nightfall, came suddenly down from the tower.

He walked over to where K'ing was experimenting with several fighting stances, and was gratified to see the boy carefully calculating the strengths and weaknesses of each. Although the boy had only been shown the barest rudiments of Kung Fu, his mind was so clear, and his body so strong and well-controlled, that Lin suspected he would be able to practice creditably with Kak Nan Tang, who had begun his study of Kung Fu with a very competent Master at the age of five—a little too young, Lin Fong felt—and who, the Master knew, loved nothing better than to show off his already highly developed knowledge of many of the martial arts.

"I see that Kak Nan Tang approaches," the Master said. "There is a cloud of dust high on the southern ridge."

Then he disappeared into the house.

K'ing stood for half an hour watching with some uncertainty as a small form grew less small across successive dunes.

Finally the shape became more than a shape.

K'ing could tell first that the boy was slightly stockier than himself, a bit taller, and that he walked with a bounce in his step that made him surge forward in the middle of each stride.

Next he noted the dark skin and jet black hair that brushed in ragged points down to his thick black eyebrows.

Soon he could tell that Kak's face was full, and that his widely spaced eyes stood above a flat nose with broad, shallow nostrils; that Kak's wide, high cheekbones and broad jawbones narrowed into a small, firm, yet barely defined chin. His ears were large and protruded slightly. His mouth was small, with the full lower lip and turned-up corners that suggested a hint of a deeply hidden grin.

It was an ambiguous face from a distance— not one that K'ing immediately trusted nor one that he immediately suspected. And his bearing was the same—either adventurous or aggressive, but K'ing could not tell which. Lin Fong had told him that he might feel these things about Kak, but that these sudden uncertainties were to be expected now.

Kak was within fifty yards. The shadow of his hidden grin broke to the surface, and K'ing could see large, white teeth, the top front two showing a slight separation between them.

Just this suggestion of a smile was all K'ing needed to make him feel that things would go well

with Kak Nan Tang.

As the waiting boy rapidly added details to his previously blank picture of his new companion, he was aware that the other boy was staring back at him with the same steadfast curiosity. It suddenly struck him that he had never given much thought to what he looked like. He had never seen a mirror, and it had never occurred to him to confront his reflection in water. He now had a difficult time imagining how his own appearance struck the boy who was rapidly approaching him. He knew that his face was leaner than Kak's; that his eyes were deeper set, and of course, startlingly blue above his high cheekbones. He knew that his nose was more Western than it was Oriental, that his lips were thinner than Kak's, and that his chin, although roughly the same round shape, was not lost in vestiges of baby fat as was the older boy's. But he had no idea at all how a stranger who was roughly his peer would judge him.

Kak wore simple dress—a robe like those of K'ing and Lin Fong of thin, rough cotton; only Kak's was deep blue, and had some simple embroidery around the bottom of stylized trees and dragons and strange cliffs. On his feet, he wore straw sandals, and over his shoulder he carried a shiny leather pouch. Its fine craftsmanship and delicate tooling seemed subtly to contradict his otherwise unassuming appearance.

As Kak's grin widened imperceptibly, K'ing had the feeling that he could see beneath it the kind of strength and sense of self that had made Lin Fong believe this boy was capable of becoming a great Master of Kung Fu.

Kak halted five feet from K'ing and threw his

pouch to the ground with a kind of finality that said, "Ah, I have finished my journey." He looked straight into K'ing's eyes, and said, "I am Kak Nan Tang." His head inclined in a slight bow toward the younger boy.

K'ing thought the gesture formally correct but slightly cold.

"I am Chong Fei K'ing," replied the Son of the Flying Tiger. He wondered whether Kak's city upbringing, or his additional two years of life, had pushed him much farther toward the world of such formalities. But Lin Fong had told him that people in different places acted very differently, and he did not think much of it.

After this greeting, Kak silently held his ground, gazing persistently at the younger boy as the seconds dragged by. K'ing found himself becoming uneasy. He felt something unexpected coming.

Suddenly Kak's body dropped low into a strange and dramatic fighting stance. His left leg shot out straight in front of him, and he crouched with his weight on the right foot. His left hand was upraised in the slashing position, but his right stuck up behind his head, its fingers held in a rigid claw.

The younger boy flinched back. His eyes fastened on Kak's in a curious, penetrating stare.

The grin which had disappeared began weakly returning.

K'ing continued to stare, and finally brought forth a playful yet half-mischievous smile from the older boy's face.

Lin Fong had told K'ing that he would begin two man Kung Fu forms when Kak arrived. But he had

not said that this practice would begin so soon. Still, K'ing was familiar with the forms, and although Kak Nan Tang had omitted the usual salutation and adopted a strange stance, he decided to put up as best a defense as he could.

Analyzing Kak's posture closely, he went into a sideways semi-crouch. Most of his weight rested on his slightly turned back foot, and he found his left hand, the fingers spread and somewhat rigidly bent, in a clawing position six or eight inches in front of his chin, while his left, more widely open as for a Rock Smash Parry, hung palm-out about three inches in front of his stomach. It was not a dramatic stance, and certainly not in the tradition of Kung Fu as a stylized brand of formal combat. But Lin Fong had told the boy that the strength of Kung Fu was that it used the body as a whole in all of its offensive and defensive potential, as opposed to sport fighting like boxing, which forbade the use of the legs and was done with gloves, or wrestling, which did not allow striking with the hands or feet. So he felt free to place his body in a stance which would best allow him to use all of it as seemed to be required in the face of Kak's challenge.

Now Kak inched toward him, bobbing his head slightly, as if to view his defenses from a number of different angles. Although his eyes were now bright and playful, and although he exaggerated his bobbing now and then to the point where he caricatured himself and even chuckled shortly at his movements. K'ing had the distinctive feeling that beneath it all there was something important about the encounter. So he himself began to move forward. In a short time the two were standing toe to toe.

Suddenly Kak's body shot upward, and his foot flashed nearly to K'ing's face in a leaping Lightning Kick.

K'ing, who had at least had some practice in evading such blows, shifted sideways, his right knee grazing the ground as he deflected the blow upward with his left forearm in a Leaping Deer Block.

Suddenly Kak's hand shot out toward the younger boy's face in a swift Side Hammer Blow. K'ing batted it away with a Whipping Branch Parry.

Kak's groin seemed to lie open to a sharp Ram's Head Punch, which K'ing could deliver by swiveling to face him straight on.

But K'ing was cautious. He did not believe that Kak, so much older and more experienced, would leave himself open to such a thing unless it were a trap. As he half-swiveled and faked the jab, and then drew back, he could see that, had he completed it, his arm would have been overextended.

Kak recoiled at the fake, and at the same time dropped his right shoulder and straightened his right arm for a Knife-Point to the face.

K'ing, throwing his left foot forward in a springing motion like that of a Cossack dancer, swept his arm upward to parry the blow, and at the same time aimed his right in a palm-down fist at Kak's midsection. The swiftness of his movement surprised even himself.

Slightly off-balance, the older boy sprang backward, and Kak thought he could see a shadow of a grimace of frustration cross his face. But Kak managed to deliver a weak Raised-Hoof Kick with

his right foot as he hopped on his left in the yielding sand.

K'ing brushed the kick aside with a left-handed Rock Smash Parry, faked a sharp jab with his right toward Kak's throat, and then faked a reaction kick with his left foot. Kak was close to full retreat.

But when K'ing came at him with a slashing left toward his momentarily exposed kidney, the older boy brushed the blow inward instead of outward—and then, diving for the retreating arm, caught it and yanked hard across the front of his body.

To his surprise, K'ing found himself falling: his feet, for an instant, had been parallel, one behind the other, making him an easy prey for such a simple, but to him unthought of, tactic.

Now the older boy wrenched his arm back around, spinning him like a top and sending him sprawling to the ground.

K'ing felt a momentary flash of disappointment; but it was only a flash, for suddenly Kak's full weight fell on him.

He tried to break Kak's hard hold that pinned his arms to his sides. The sand flew as the two rolled and squirmed spitting dust.

K'ing did not know what was going on, for he had no understanding of games or of the kind of fighting that went, with them. He resisted Kak gently in his confusion, until the older boy broke out laughing. Had he known that K'ing, only two short weeks before, had never heard of Kung Fu nor dreamt of its existence, he surely would have been astounded.

K'ing, less accustomed to laughter and still somewhat perplexed, searched the timbre of Kak's

voice for a false ring. But, finding none, and at the same time suddenly seeing amusement in the ease with which he had been duped, also began to laugh.

Now the two bodies tumbled and twisted, stopping more than once to breathe as their joviality increased. When they were completely exhausted, they found themselves lying next to the well, a good thirty yards from where they had started. They crawled into its shade and lay there panting.

It had been a strange greeting, for Kak had never met a boy at once as wise and as naive as K'ing, and had treated him much as he would have treated the other students of Kung Fu in the village from which he had come. But K'ing had met his playful probing challenge well, and whatever doubts either boy might have had were dissolved in the pleasure of relaxation.

In a few moments Lin Fong appeared.

K'ing simply sat in the shade and watched the Master walk to a position in front of them and look down with a half quizzical, raised-eyebrow smile. But Kak scrambled quickly to his feet, stood rigidly upright, and bowed deeply from the waist.

K'ing glanced up at Lin Fong questioningly, but the Master returned him a reassuring look. Then he put his hands on Kak's shoulders and looked deeply into the boy's eyes.

"It is good that you are here," the Master said simply. He paused. Then, "I see you have been well schooled in the traditional ways of showing respect to your elders. While you are here, these formalities will not be necessary."

The old man paused a moment.

"I see that your Kung Fu practice turned to play as soon as Chong Fei K'ing was thrown to the ground."

K'ing and Kak glanced sideways at one another, fearful that they had somehow violated the seriousness of their undertaking. But the Master said, "That is well. For in addition to the strict forms of Kung Fu discipline, it is necessary to play. That way, you may see what you are aiming at: for your goal is to master the forms so completely that you may learn to play with them, even in the heat of a battle to the death." His brow knitted slightly and he added: "Although perhaps when that happens, the play is more like the playing of music than the playing of games."

With this, the Master smiled down on the pair and once more walked off.

The two boys looked at one another, as much as to say, "Well, that's over." Kak had not been there half an hour, and already K'ing was feeling how much closer he immediately was to this boy than to Lin Fong, who, although he smiled often, almost never laughed, and certainly never played games.

Suddenly K'ing leapt upon his new-found friend, and once more the two were rolling over and over and grappling in the sand.

After several minutes during which K'ing once more felt the exhilaration of pure play whirling away whatever doubts remained about Kak Nan Tang, the older boy rolled free of his grasp, and stood perfectly still, his hands straight down at his sides, in a gesture that dared K'ing to leap at him. The younger boy took the dare, inching up toward

him and then lunging out to pin Kak's arms to his sides in a bear-hug.

Kak's legs did something which K'ing could not see, and suddenly he found himself staring at the sky, his body spinning dizzily; and then he was lying on his back in the sand.

He laughed at the trick. Whatever it was, it had been a good one.

Kak took up his position again, and they repeated the exercise, this time with K'ing looking down to see what his feet were doing. He almost saw, but not quite, and ended up laughing on his back once more.

The third time, Kak faked with his feet, and somehow broke K'ing's hold with a dipping twist of his torso. Before K'ing knew it, a hand had grasped him behind the knee, and he had swooped to the ground yet again.

Still laughing, he gazed up in curiosity.

By this time Lin Fong had risen and strolled over to watch. K'ing turned his quizzical gaze toward the Master.

"Jujitsu," Lin Fong said. "It is the Nagewasa type, which teaches the art of throwing. I do not think you have even heard these words. You see, Kung Fu is only for fighting at a distance; if you were good at it, it would be hard for anyone to get his arms around you in the way in which you got your arms around Kak Non Tang. But as it happens, men do sometimes get a hold on you. Then, it is well to know Jujitsu. For while Kung Fu teaches many things that may be of use in such a situation, Jujitsu adds many more. It is a Japanese form of fighting which, like many other forms, you will

learn in time. We have begun with Kung Fu, because it best schools the mind and the body in quickness and control, and especially the mind, since it is the freely dancing body which most easily moves to the music of the Tao. Once you have learned Kung Fu, many other kinds of fighting, such as boxing, will seem only limited forms of it, while other kinds, such as Jujitsu and wrestling, will be seen to be somewhat different."

Lin Fong walked away, leaving Kak to demonstrate to K'ing a few more of the throwing techniques of Nagewasa, with the younger boy giggling in amazement from his seat on the ground after each demonstration.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Masters of the Blue Circle

The very next day Lin told them as they awoke, "After your morning meditation, I will tell you a story."

He glanced back and forth between them.

"Now, we will go our separate ways for a time, while we meditate upon the wisdom of the ages:

The Tao gives rise to One
And One divides to Two
And Two gives birth to Three
And Three begets Ten Thousand Things.

Ten Thousand Things in harmony
Combine the movement of the
Ying and Yang.

A violent man will die a violent death.
This is the essence of the teaching.

For the next hour, the three sat in total silence in their lotus positions on the floor.

When Lin Fong, after his manner, rang the deep, brassy gong to end the period of mindless-ness, K'ing noticed all too quickly that Kak Nan Tang was looking out the windows and door, and tapping his finger on his knee nervously. This was not a person who had just returned from far away and was surprised and delighted at the smallest thing in the

world in which he had awakened.

But then Lin Fong said, "Let us go outside." And K'ing, deciding once more that Kak's style of meditation was not to be wondered at but to be accepted, eagerly followed.

The two boys sat opposite Lin Fong in the partial shade of the sand fence to the east of the house. The Master began immediately.

"Thousands of years ago this desert was an ocean floor."

He paused to glance at the boys. K'ing was as he would have expected. Kak seemed to be rapidly coming to understand his manner, and the older boy abandoned his impatience and let his imagination paint the picture Lin Fong described.

"The waters were surrounded by rich lands covered with deep forests and rolling pastures full of grass and flowers. Fruit trees bloomed on the hillsides in careless abundance. Wild rice waved in the lowlands—enough to feed millions. Sheep and cattle and horses and water buffalo wandered freely. The cycles of living and dying, unreal where indifferent Nature reigned, moved on in the untouched and untouchable wilderness.

"And then there came a wandering tribe from a faraway land.

"They came seeking nothing, blown on the Wind in the Void. The legends say they had moved from Atlantis to Elysium to Eden across the face of the nearly vacant earth.

"They came to the edge of the ocean that was here. They made their way slowly around it to the north. They came upon a thin arm of land that

stretched far southward, out of sight, into the water.

“They followed. They came to its end. Across a narrow channel was a fabulous, fertile island that had been cut off from the mainland for thousands of years. At its center, snowy peaks jutted toward heaven. Around them were trees taller and fatter even than the ancient redwoods and sequoias of America. In the foothills they found every kind of edible plant known to man. Along its shoreline, fish-crowded seas pounded onto rocks and wide stretches of sand. This was the most perfect of all places.

“They settled on the island. They founded a city. They called it Zhamballah.”

Lin was gazing off to the north. He could feel the boys following the current of his story.

“The myths of every civilization have contained men's dreams of such a Celestial City, where the only law is the law of Jove, which every person follows as easily as the sun rises and sets or water flows downward. Some say these dreams are imaginings of the impossible. Others say they are true memories: memories of the City of Zhamballah, which really existed here.”

He turned to them. “It is known that there were fabulous cities here in the Gobi before it became a desert. There is still a city of Zhamballah here, more perfect than men may imagine. Its perfection does not rest on the foundations of worldly cities. It rests on the indifference of the universe itself. It rests upon the Way. It moves and changes, yet it is eternal.”

He turned away again.

“It is said the city of Zhamballah thrived in isolated perfection for ten thousand years. Other tribes wandered to the banks of the great ocean, and across the channel separating the island from the mainland a bridge was built, and in its center a portal. All those who passed through it took the Way to Zhamballah, and passed without effort into the eternal, living peace of the Tao. But the Tao was not yet named, for it needed no name.

“And then forces deep within the earth moved. The sea around Zhamballah began to drain away. The wet breezes turned dry, and then hot. Over the course of centuries the sea dried up to flat, salty pools. Zhamballah became a desert mountain surrounded by a thousand Dead Seas. The springs that had burst forth from its sides in cascades of crystal water slowed to trickles and then stopped. The forests petrified and were covered by the dust that blew from the parched plains.

“At first the people of Zhamballah tried to preserve their Celestial City. They dug wells and irrigation ditches, and turned to planting where once they had only had to harvest. But on the salt plains where surrounding seas had been, nothing would grow. Food became scarce; water scarcer. Escape across the hostile desert was fraught with danger. Those who remained never knew whether those who had set out from the city had reached a new haven or perished on the journey. No one who left ever returned.

“Those who stayed were unwilling to forsake the remnants of their city of perfect peace—for they knew the harmony they had discovered in that place could be transplanted nowhere else. But men fell to fighting as they staked out claims and

hoarded food and water and things of value, such as gold, which might buy them. Slowly the city of Zhamballah turned into an earthly city, and then into a living hell; and as it did, the Blue Circle was born.

“The Blue Circle was composed of a dozen descendants of the original founders of Zhamballah. They alone could see that although it was a real city existing on the face of the earth, its perfection rested in another realm—the realm of the spiritual peace their ancestors had found there.

“At first when men started bickering over land and food these men tried to convey their vision: the spiritual was being overcome by the shallow and worldly.

“When later the lootings and murders and vendettas broke out, they studied the nature of violence and how to turn it back upon itself until it melted away. They invented methods of fighting which defeated fighting itself. What their methods were we do not know. Perhaps they were like those of Tai Chi Ch'uan or Kung Fu.

“These men gave away their land and their food and their water and went about confronting violence wherever it broke out, melting it away with the skill of Perfect Masters. But the people came to hate them, for in their presence no one could gain an advantage. “If some of us do not die, then all will die,” they said. “Let the law of nature reign, and let the strongest survive!” But the Masters of the Blue Circle were the strongest, and they said, “Let the food and water that is here be divided evenly. Let each do with a little less, and depend more for strength on the nourishment that comes from meditation.” They tried to teach people the way in

which they dove deeply into their own souls to regain there the true peace of the City of Zhamballah, and to show them how few earthly things were then needed. If all had followed them, all would have survived on what remained of food and water.

"But then there arose a leader among those who hated the Blue Circle. His name was Zedak, and he said, 'The Blue Circle uses magic to put us under their spell. They have put the City of Zhamballah under their power with their ways of fighting. What is food enough for them is not food enough for us. We will all starve while they await our deaths and seize upon the moment to capture the peace of Zhamballah for themselves. We must fight magic with magic. We must kill them.'

"Zedak gathered a huge force of the strongest men in Zhamballah. They robbed and looted until they had gathered up all the city's food and water. The Blue Circle fought them at every turn, but there were too many: wherever there was not a Blue Master, the people lost everything. Then Zedak led his men to the face of a cliff at the side of the Mountain of Heaven at the center of Zhamballah. His men massed behind him. He wore a blood-red robe and a crown. He flew into a frenzy, conjuring demons and spirits with his spell: 'Let the mountain part before the powers of Zedak, that out of the hellfire of its bowels we may take strength to shed the blood of the Blue Circle!'

"A crack streaked down the face of the mountain, white and burning, jagged as lightning. A smoking fissure opened the mouth of a huge cavern. Its entrance dripped with blood. Out of the thundering sound came the words: 'By the power of Zedak is

the Red Circle born!" Zedak led his army inside. The fissure closed behind them.

"Thirteen days later the wind rose over Zhamballah. Dark clouds appeared to cover the sky, and the people said, 'There will be rain!' But then the thunder crashed dry and hard about them, and the smell of gunpowder filled the air.

"The Blue Circle felt the magic of Zedak in the storm. As one they dispersed to the edges of the city and hurried the people to the Golden Square at its center. They took the stations of the winds: two each to the north, south, east, and west; one each to the points between.

"The storm descended from the north. The Masters to the north turned their faces toward red-hot pellets of rocky hail. They raised their arms to the storm and as one cried a single word: 'Zhamballah!'

"The molten hail did not touch them. Not a stone fell inside the magic circle of the Blue Masters.

"And then there arose a chanting from the thousands in the Golden Square. They faced the north and then slowly turned to the points of the compass: 'You shall be the Masters of the North forever! You shall be the Master of the Northeast forever! You shall be the Masters of the East forever!'

"And then the side of the Mountain of Heaven crashed open. Out marched the Army of the Red Circle.

"Never has there been such a terrible sight. They were armed with the horrors of hell. Zedak himself rode a spiny dragon with the teeth of the sabre-toothed tiger spurting forth the poison of the

cobra; the talons of the eagle lashed boring holes in the granite before it as it moved. At the end of its tail was a cluster of white-hot spikes.

In Zedak's right hand was a whip of fire. In his left was the sceptre of the Kingdom of Darkness, studded with jewels and the eyes of the dead. Behind him his soldiers rode alligators and elephants with deadly, curving tusks. They led grizzly bears and Bengal Tigers, and creatures slimy with the green ooze of swamps never seen. At their feet a thousand deadly snakes slithered and hissed. They were armed with bows of glowing metal and swords and maces and lances more terrifying than any the world has seen. Before Zedak's sceptre as he went there were explosions: for the Lord of Darkness had given to him alone the secret of gunpowder.

"They set upon the Masters of the North. The first, in a mighty leap, soared over the dragon's head. He was the Master of the Northern Sky. He set upon Zedak as the whip of fire flamed across his back and the sceptre of the Kingdom of Darkness smote his forehead. But the whip of fire turned to water and flowed away; and the sceptre shattered to dust and blew on the wind. The Master of the Northern Sky sent Zedak tumbling from his dragon and they rolled to the ground in a death struggle.

"The Master of the Northern Earth attacked the dragon. Whirling between the clatter of its talons on the rocks, he moved like a ghost to the throat of the beast as it reared and spat poison into his eyes. Blinded, he heard the sounds of the dragon's breathing in the channels of its throat, and as the fire of its breath billowed around him he darted like

a bat to grasp the scales of its neck in his fingers. The dragon thrashed but could not throw him. It struck with its fangs but could not reach him. The Master's feet were bare, and with his toes he gripped and tore like a monkey. The dragon's green scales fell like rain, and the Master bored into its flesh. He opened its throat with his bare hands. Green blood gushed out and washed him away as the dragon withered and twitched and fell and died.

"Now Zedak, in his death struggle, summoned all his power and all his forces. The Master of the Northern Sky slashed and kicked and tore at him; but his soldiers rushed to his aid, and now the Master fought a hundred men.

"Their weapons could not touch him as he danced to the music of slashing swords and thrusting daggers. Soldiers fell all about him as his flashing feet battered their bones to pulp and punctured their flesh and his knifing hands speared out their eyes and opened their throats and ripped out their guts.

"Zedak escaped. He led his army surging past the Masters of the North and into the Golden Square. They set upon the people of Zhamballah and butchered them even as the Blue Circle closed in upon the Red. Swords bit the flesh of screaming women and children as men struggled and fell, their skulls punctured by the sharp spikes of maces, their backs impaled on the daggers of darkness. Snakes slithered on the rainbow stones, striking at the ankles and calves of those who tried to flee. Alligators and bears and strange and horrible creatures which were powerless against the Blue Masters ate the flesh and sucked the blood of ordinary mortals.

“Of all the people of Zhamballah, only one survived: a small boy whose mother had climbed to the top of the jeweled Tower of Peace at the Square's center. As she stood there praying to the sky, an arrow from below pierced her back, and she fell upon the infant's body.

“The Master of the Southern Sky flew to the tower's top and raised his arms to the heavens. 'May a blue cloud poisonous to all others shield this boy until the fight has passed!' he commanded. The blue cloud descended as he leapt from the tower and fell upon the soldiers of the Red Circle.

“The fight in the Golden Square raged on till sunset over the corpses of the people of Zhamballah. The Master of the Northeast stamped a thousand poisonous snakes to death with his bare feet. The Master of the Southwest grasped the jaws of a grizzly bear and tore them apart, ripping the bottom jaw off. In a burst of blood he wrenched off the animal's head as its huge claws raked at his back. With the bottom jaw of the grizzly bear he struck right and left among the soldiers of the Red Circle, turning the magic of hell back on them as he sunk the huge and lifeless teeth into their flesh.

“The Masters of the North pursued Zedak as he rushed among his soldiers casting spells that opened the ground beneath and revealed the seething cauldron of bubbling lava in the depths of the earth. But the Master of the Northern Sky leapt over the fissures, and the Master of the Northern Earth cast spells to close them again; and Zedak could see that the end was near.

“There were but a hundred of his soldiers left as the light of the sun faded and stars appeared in the sudden blackness above. The Masters of the West

grasped alligators by the tail and flung them into the Red Circle as it grew tight around its leader.

“The last and mightiest of the soldiers of the Red Circle forsook their futile weapons and set upon the Masters of the Blue Circle with their bare hands, their teeth, their kicking feet, their knees and elbows. For now they saw that their weapons had been powerful magic working against them.

“For every Blue Master there were eight Red Circle fighters. The last four, the strongest, formed a square around Zedak, who entered into a trance as the death struggles raged all around him.

“The Master of the Southeast was smothered by a landslide of bloodthirsty bodies as eighty clawing fingers grasped to dig out his heart. There was a seething mound of violence on the rainbow stones of the Golden Square. But the Peace of Zhamballah was with him. In the sweaty darkness he picked out the fingers as they touch him and snapped them, clamping them under his arms and between his legs and twisting, biting them off with his teeth, crashing them against the stones with his elbows. The mound of bodies burst forth with the shape of his body as he fought his way upward like lava from a volcano, kicking behind him, slashing before him, elbowing to his sides. To be near him was to be dead. Red Circle soldiers reeled away from him, blinded, choking, crippled. He set upon them and finished them as they called upon the powers of darkness and of Zedak to save them. They did not know that Zedak, in his trance, was offering them up to the Prince of Darkness as a sacrifice—their blood for his escape.

“The Master of the Eastern Sky turned and ran when eight soldiers of the Red Circle came after

him. Of all the Masters, he was the most devious, and killed most quickly: for his enemies took him to be fleeing, and each wanted the honor of putting an end to him. He ran for ten seconds until the fastest of the Red Circle soldiers was on his heels and the rest were strung out in a line behind. Then he turned and buried his Knife Point in the leader's gut, whirled and crashed in the face of the second with his elbow, kicked in the groin of the third, speared out the eyes of the fourth. The toe of his bare foot lanced up under the chin of the fifth. The sixth fell tripped, and broke his neck from behind with a pounding fist as he fell. The seventh and eighth ran from him together, but he caught them and in a flying leap cracked his heels against their backbones, snapping their spines. They sprawled at the feet of Zedak's bodyguards, who looked past them as though they were stone.

"All of the Masters of the Blue Circle met their tests. Some pursued the last of their enemies through the city, up the sides of the Mountain of Heaven, out into the desert. The Master of the Southern Earth caught the last of them near the peak of the Mountain of Heaven and threw him screaming down the face of the very cliff that had opened at Zedak's command.

"But the price of Zedak's escape had been paid to the powers of darkness. Their cups ran over with blood, and from deep in the underworld they heard his incantation as the Blue Circle closed around him: 'May the poison of the Red Cloud surround me as the poison of the Blue Cloud surrounds the Tower of Peace, that I may go forth and found your city on this earth. May the Red Cloud surround me and my warriors until we have built within it the

Tower of War!

"The pores of Zedak's skin opened and from them the poisonous mist of his own blood flowed forth. The Red Cloud obscured him, and the Blue Circle Masters could not approach it. They were consumed with dizziness and knew that if they entered it, they themselves would fall under Zedak's power.

"As the moon rose and shed its soft light over the scene of carnage and the barren plains of the desert, the Red Cloud moved off. Fissures opened in the ground behind it which the Blue Masters could not close. The Red Cloud disappeared over the southern horizon.

"The Masters of the Blue Circle brought the infant who had been saved by the Blue Cloud down from the Tower of Peace. They placed him in the center of their mystical circle as they sat and meditated.

"For three years they trained him in the art of fighting and filled his soul with the secrets of inner peace.

"Then they sent him southward on the trail of Zedak. As he went, they told him: 'We are not of this earth, nor is Zedak. But we from our City of Zhamballah, and he from whatever evil city he has founded, may send forth emissaries to the world of men. Do not be deceived; for the City of Zhamballah is real, and when you need it, you will find it again. The way to it will be clear to you among the sand and gravel and rock of the Gobi. The city will sink into the ground, yet above it the heavens will still pour forth their golden light, and the sky will be blue in its infinite depth. You and those you choose

to be Masters of the Blue Circle on earth will fight the fights of men, until all the earth is covered with the Peace of Zhamballah. When we call you or those you have chosen, or when you need our guidance, then you will be here among us.'

"The boy they called the Master of the Earthly Center, and they sent him off. He found and trained eleven other Masters. He fought against the emissaries of Zedak until he chose a successor and was called back to live in Zhamballah for all eternity. In time the new Master of the Earthly Center chose his successor, and himself returned to Zhamballah. So it has gone up to the present time."

Now Lin Fong turned away from the boys, who sat mesmerized on the ground before him. His ancient crystal eyes swept the sands of the desert, and his robe blew about his bare legs in the wind. Then he turned back to them. "I am now called the Master of the Earthly Center," he said. "And you—you have been chosen by the Masters of Zhamballah to carry on the earthly fight of the Blue Circle. That is why you are here."

"You are to become members of the Blue Circle. This will happen in a manner that will not be of my choosing. The best I can do is to prepare you as I know how, in the manner in which I myself was prepared by my Master before me."

"All of life is a test and a trial, and you will be tested by life itself. If you hold fast to the Tao, a time will come when you will be initiated into the Blue Circle. This will be the strangest and most important event of your lives. You will be initiated by others, and yet you will be alone. How this will happen you will not understand until the time has

come. When the time comes, you will know it.

“That is all I have to say.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Promise

In the weeks and months that followed, Chong Fei K'ing almost automatically measured time not from the date of his birth, nor from the date of any other significant event that he could remember, but from the date of Kak's arrival. The two boys, not only out of necessity, but out of mutual desire, became spiritual companions.

The days and weeks rolled slowly by, and late summer turned to autumn, with no effects on the desert other than a slight chilling of the wind and an almost imperceptible dampening of the air. The nomads, on their way to their permanent winter encampments, were almost ceremonial as they presented their last large bundles of wheat and millet and dried fish and vegetables—obtained at the small depots they passed on their travels—to Lin Fong.

Then came the screeching cold of the winter, driving the sand across the barren landscape with sharp, frozen fury, and occasionally mixing it with small, hard flakes of snow. It seemed only to change the color of the dunes and level them out a little as it drifted in their hollows.

Spring followed, all but lifeless, with only a few tiny plants that took root around the stone foundations of the house and at the edges of the well to show that even here, where there was so little to nourish growth, regeneration was intended.

Chong Fei K'ing and Kak Nan Tang, throughout these months, followed an almost rigid pattern of life that, despite their confinement, they found full to overflowing—although the highly active and impatient Kak once in a while gave small evidences that the lack of adventure frustrated him.

Each morning Lin Fong arose with the sun, and shortly afterward the boys were awake.

After a simple breakfast followed a period of meditation of between one and two hours.

Then came Kung Fu practice, with the Master's eye ever on the boys' rapidly flashing bodies and his mind ever reading theirs with unerring accuracy.

"K'ing," he would say, "you must move your elbow just a bit further out for your Monkey Blow. I see you fear some small imbalance will arise from your left foot if you do this. But if you turn it slightly, and feel your bone as a rod against with the tendons pull..."

K'ing would try again.

"Not quite... you must snap the elbow more sharply. Once more, now... and again... and again. Do you feel it?"

At first it was plain that the boys' styles differed sharply; for Kak was aggressive, and the Master was constantly pointing to weaknesses in his defenses brought on by over-enthusiasm; while K'ing instinctively fought more defensively, and took joy in turning away a blow and causing Kak to stumble or draw back. He did not much like striking Kak's midsection or brushing his throat with a Knife-Point that, with just a little more pressure, would have been fatal.

Lin Fong pointed this out to them. He said, "You two boys are opposites, like the Yin and Yang."

He referred to the dual principles of positive and negative, symbolized by the circle divided into black and white halves by a line in the shape of an S, each half with a dot of the opposite color in its curve of the S.

"But each of you must try to take the strengths of the other, and rid yourselves of your individual weaknesses, so that each of you will become a single Yin and Yang.

"K'ing must strike out with more conviction. Kak must learn to turn blows aside and use the strength of his adversary against him.

"You both must embody the movement of the Yin and Yang, which moves in all directions and yet nowhere. You must make the Yin and Yang turn to each other and back again."

Eventually—to a large extent, at least—each boy reached his balance. This was achieved more through meditation than through practice; and especially a startling meditation upon what Lin Fong called the Urge to Kill.

He told them, "This urge is buried deeply in both of you. It is buried deeply in all men, civilization has forced it down. Kak is more temperamental, and therefore he perhaps occasionally has felt evidences of it stirring—especially when he becomes frustrated in practice because he thinks he is not progressing fast enough. He must try to bring it fully to light, to feel its power, and to practice whirling it away in the Wind that Blows in the Void. K'ing perhaps has never experienced it. He must, in meditation, try to dredge it up and feel it; for if he

does not, he will not begin to learn to dissipate it, and someday it will come upon him suddenly and he may do evil."

After each long morning practice session, there was another short period of meditation. K'ing spent many of these at first trying to feel this Urge to Kill, but Lin Fong had warned him only to attempt this when his mind was completely clear, and not to use any small feelings of irritation to help him bring it about.

Finally one day, to his own terror, he succeeded. His young body shook, and his blood boiled; but he steadfastly maintained it—directed toward no one—until he could make it ebb away at will. From then on he meditated upon it daily, until he could control it perfectly, and was satisfied that it would never rise unless he called it up in order, in the peace of his own isolation, to whirl it away again.

After one such session, Kak asked, "Could it not be that in some desperate fight, one might want to call up this Urge to give one added strength?"

Ling Fong looked at him penetratingly. "No," he said.

These short meditation periods were followed by lunch, after which came an hour or two of reading from books and discussions about anything the boys cared to ask about—ocean voyages, ancient history, politics, foreign languages, literature.

Then came an exercise period, during which Lin's careful prescriptions sculpted the boys' bodies to pictures of compact and mobile power.

"These exercises are not to make you into hulking musclemen," he said.

“For in Kung Fu, movement comes first, and bulging muscles cannot send their power in all directions. You will become very strong indeed. But more important, you will have unending endurance in your bodies to match the unending will which your meditations are giving you.”

There was some lifting of weights, and there were many exercises from the Western world which were used to build strength that could not come from lyrical movements like those of Tai Chi, which the boys continued to practice. But there were also a bewildering variety of stretching exercises, and there was endless running. Even in the coldest of winter winds, in the most hostile of blizzards, they dressed in layers of quilted cloth or garments stuffed with cotton, and ran for several miles in the deep sand.

Immediately following this every day there was another Kung Fu session. Lin Fong said, “It is what you learn when you have passed the state of exhaustion that your body best remembers.”

Often there was also the studying of foreign languages, religions, and philosophies. The boys entered into deep discussions of them with brilliance—sometimes nearly generating heat, when one of them became stubborn on a point—and eventually found that Lin Fong, although a Tao-ist to the core, had a wide knowledge of such things. He even denied some of the teachings of the Taoist sages in favor of other ways of approaching certain matters.

So impressed was K'ing with the Master's knowledge that he asked him whether he had ever written.

"Oh, a long time ago," he said, brushing off the question. "But never in Chinese." He seemed to think deeply for a moment. "But I will tell you this. Before I die, I intend to write down all the things—you might call them secrets—which I know that my pupils are not likely to stumble upon by themselves. When I do, I will put them into that carved ivory box over there"—he pointed to a box that sat on the mantle—"and if you or Kak ever think of it after I am gone, you may open it. The key, as you know, is on this string around my neck..."

This satisfied K'ing, who had often noticed the key but never bothered to wonder about it.

But Kak, overhearing, said "Why do you not tell them to us now? Suppose the box is lost somehow?" The Master smiled. "There is much else I have to tell you before they can be revealed. But to satisfy you, I will think on them tonight, and I will put them in the box tomorrow. That way you will know they are there."

A few days after this exchange, K'ing entered the house to find Kak standing before the mantle, his eyes closed, his hands upstretched like those of the Praying Mantis, his fingertips lightly brushing the outside of Lin Fong's ivory box. K'ing was mystified as Kak, suddenly awaking from a sort of trance at his approach, drew his hands down and turned a little bit too casually to glance out the front door. Aware that K'ing had seen him, he said, "I have never examined that box closely before. It is very minutely carved. I was meditating upon the shapes on it..."

K'ing thought this entirely possible, since Kak's meditations, he had learned, sometimes took much

more concrete forms than his own abstract flights of fancy. But then he noticed that on Kak's wrists were two strange-looking wooden bracelets decorated with bits of Imperial Yellow Paper, which were inscribed with characters in red ink. He asked Kak about them. The older boy pursed his lips and stared at the floor for a second. "They are peachwood," he replied.

This was enough for K'ing; for he and Kak and Lin Fong had had many discussions about Taoist magic; and although there were in the few treatises Lin Fong had on the subject no mentions of bracelets, K'ing knew that it was peach-wood which was supposed to contain the vital shen-magic that gave force to charms written with peachwood pens, to divinations scratched in sand with peachwood rods, to swords and daggers made of peachwood.

There was no need for K'ing to speak, for Kak knew that his attitude toward magic was the same as Lin Fong's. And the Master had said, "It is difficult to tell what is magic and what is not. Certainly all of life is a miracle, and the forces of the Cosmos defy our comprehension. But to attempt to influence them with magic is idle superstition and worse; for it implies that one wishes to control them rather than to be at peace with them. And further, the belief in magic signifies the belief in many diverse powers, spirits, and gods, and often the belief that one may trick or fool them. But there are not many powers, as Taoists who have turned to magic have stained the purity of the world's most perfect religion hold. They would clutter the Way with obstacles of their own invention. Magic works only on oneself, and since it is not grounded in truth, the magician always

works Black Magic upon his own soul.”

But K'ing was aware that, in spite of this injunction, Kak often studied books on Taoist magic from Lin Fong's library not as one interested in learning about strange customs, but as one who was unwilling to turn his back on any possible source of power that might aid them in bringing the city of Zhamballah to earth once they became Masters of the Blue Circle. Lin Fong was inclined to allow Kak to do this—he was aware of the nature of Kak's interest—in hopes that he would come on his own to a clearer understanding of the impotency of magic. But K'ing wondered what the Master's reaction would be if he knew that Kak was actually trying to practice magic.

Kak, at the same time, wondered whether K'ing suspected that every time the younger boy bested him in Kung Fu practice, he performed certain rituals designed to throw the advantage back to him.

The boys stood thinking these thoughts for perhaps a minute. Then Kak said, “I was trying to find whether the secrets in the Master's box have magical potency—whether they are charms or spells. For it may be that he denies a belief in the power of magic now because he thinks we are not ready to wield that power yet.”

K'ing shook his head. “I am sure,” he said, “that they are at once the greatest magic in the world and no magic at all.”

Kak removed the bracelets and put them into his pocket. K'ing never saw them again.

The boys' days always ended well after sunset, with more meditation and afterward with sound

and deep sleep.

This routine continued for five years. It was interrupted only by the periods during which Lin Fong retired to his tower to meditate, or went wandering off by himself into the desert.

At first the boys stayed home during these periods and it was then that Kak devoted the most time to conditioning his hands. K'ing had chosen not to do this yet. Lin Fong had said to them, "Do it or not, as you wish. The conditioning of the hands is better suited to Kak's style of Kung Fu than to K'ing's anyhow." So Kak spent many hours hammering on rocks and boards, until he could strike them with astounding fury while feeling no pain.

But after the first winter the boys took to roaming the desert together when Lin Fong was physically or mentally absent.

In later years, K'ing lost the memory of most individual days spent at home. But he remembered his journeys with Kak Nan Tang almost footstep by footstep; for the older boy had great excitement for these adventures, and he communicated a great deal of it to K'ing. There were many things he could show the younger boy and tell him about.

The first time the pair wandered, without food or water, out into the desert for a destinationless journey of a week, it was at Lin Fong's suggestion. But K'ing was so immediately taken with the older boy's self-confident, almost brazen attitude toward the wasteland and all things and people in it, and he took such joy in augmenting his knowledge of the world in which Kak had grown up—the world of cities and civilization—with the accounts of one

whose enthusiasm for them was still fresh, that he began to look forward to these trips with eager anticipation.

For the first few years, the boys did not so much as approach a town; and when later they did, it was not so much the clusters of mud or straw huts, with their camels and dogs and small children running in the streets, their small shops, their little temples, that excited him, or caused him to worry or wonder. It was more the person of Kak Nan Tang himself.

At first the things Kak showed his companion were simple, but nevertheless things which would never have occurred to K'ing. He would take a rock whose surface had been rendered scratched and lustreless by the desert's windblown sand. Cracking it open on another rock, he would reveal the bright, shining facets of a fresh surface. The boys would each take half. Assuming the lotus position, they would spend many hours in fascinated contemplation of its intricate structure.

Later, Kak would occasionally pull up a small plant by the roots, and they would marvel at the thick stem dividing and dividing itself into the infinity of tiny tendrils that allowed the plant to drink.

On others of their expeditions, Kak and K'ing ran across wandering nomad tribes. Although K'ing was always on the lookout for the Tribe of Ton Te Ming, the only news he could get of them was that they had gone far to the northwest and had never returned.

In later years, K'ing was to reflect that it was in these meetings with the nomad tribes, rather than

in their lone journeyings, that he began to see how different Kak really was from himself. Whether, as most often happened, they ran across the tribes at watering holes, or whether, as occasionally, they crossed paths with them in the arid wastelands between, if they were not recognized immediately, they were always questioned by the elders as to how two such young boys came to wander on foot with little or no food and water in such hostile country.

It was always Kak who answered: "We are the pupils of Lin Fong."

Usually this reply was more than enough to banish all questions, and to bring an almost awestruck look onto the faces of these venerable old men; and also to bring offers of food and shelter, which were always graciously refused.

These encounters always made K'ing uncomfortable. Although the Master had well earned his appellation, "Protector of the Nomads," Lin Fong himself had said, "Some of these people, I fear, think of me as a desert deity rather than as a simple follower of the Tao. And although those that bring me food do so out of friendship, and know me, those who do not wander this way think I am more than a man."

And K'ing himself was acutely aware that he himself had never done anything to help these people. Rather he had lived his whole life on their charity. In fact, he owed his very life to one of their number. Perhaps this was why he was content for his companion to answer, although it was to Kak, since he was obviously the older, that the elders first turned anyhow.

K'ing could hardly deny that Kak's habitual response was the most economical. Several times, at his insistence, Kak had tried other responses. But the elders would never be satisfied that the two were not dangerously lost runaways until they had got the truth. And when they had, they were always impatient that it had taken so long to get what they considered a satisfactory answer; after which they were embarrassed that they had questioned the boys so closely and, perhaps, condescendingly.

This last reaction made K'ing more uncomfortable than ever. So he had to agree with Kak that the direct way was best.

It was too late before K'ing realized that it was not so much Kak's words as his intonation of them that was disquieting. He came upon this revelation when, one late spring day in the fourth year of their training, they crossed paths at a watering hole with a tribe who had never heard of Lin Fong. It was a Mongol tribe from the far north—and a relatively rich one, as K'ing could see by looking at the fine, sleek horses ridden by the tribal leader and his sons, the long train of pack camels bearing large and elaborate circular tents, and the large herd of fat and healthy sheep that bleated and surged forward at the smell of water that lay ahead of them in a wide pool. The oasis lay in barren flatlands several miles from a ridge of mountains whose streams were all but exhausted as they trickled down to add their waters to those of an isolated underground spring.

The tribal leader's rock-like face betrayed a suggestion of warmth and an impending offer of the famous Mongolian hospitality so readily and unquestioningly given throughout the desert. He

leaned forward and spoke from beneath a four-sided hat with upturned flaps of fur and an onion-dome crown of scarlet silk. He nodded a rather formal and somewhat puzzled greeting. "May I ask how two young boys come to be stranded in these wastelands with no mounts? I see you seem to carry no food or water..."

"We are the pupils of Lin Fong."

The chieftain smiled and straightened. "I have not heard of this Lin Fong. But we have been this way many times before, and I know his dwelling is not nearby. Does the fact that you are his pupils serve to feed and shelter you when you are far from his house?"

Kak stiffened with surprise and rankled at this sarcastic remark. "Lin Fong is the greatest Master of Kung Fu in all the world. He wanders the desert alone for weeks at a stretch, and has no need for earthly substances such as food and water, nor for the help of beasts in making his way. It is a small thing for us, his pupils, to wander to the middle of nowhere for a day or two."

The chieftain frowned at this sharp and disrespectful reply and turned to his two sons behind him to see whether they had heard of Lin Fong. The older of them, a fierce-looking man of perhaps twenty with a long, ornately carved dagger-handle protruding from a sheath at his belt, caught the regal tone of Kak's reply, and his short temper flared. "Any fool may starve himself if he wishes. My father was concerned for your safety. As for your Lin Fong, whoever he may be, you had better be careful of boasting of his fighting prowess in the presence of those of us who are born fighters, for he is not here to protect you. If I were in the

mood to be as boastful as you, I would tell you that my brother here”—he pointed across at a slim, sharp-eyed boy from whose camel pack protruded a wickedly curving and brightly painted bow—“is a champion archer who has won many prizes in the National Day celebrations at Ulan Bator.”

“A curse upon the evil of weapons,” Kak replied. “They are the child's playthings or the coward's way of killing.”

Now the younger brother's eyes flamed and he hunched forward threateningly on the neck of his beast. “Speak softly,” he hissed. “You taunt an *arslan*!”

K'ing, his head reeling with the sudden viciousness of the encounter, gazed at the older brother. He could clearly see the calm ruthlessness of the “lion”—a Mongolian born of the breed who down through the ages had wrestled to the death in stadiums to the far north for the pleasures of God-kings and their courts, and who had emerged as the greatest wrestler in the nation. Now, he knew, contests were fought by careful rules, and deaths were unheard of. But to be styled an *arslan*, one had to have at least become National Champion...

K'ing could see, in the hands that gripped the reins, fingers that could choke an enemy to death in seconds; in the powerful arms, strength to tear and dislocate and smother; in the great thick muscles of the calves, the power for a life-snuffing scissors. He could feel the total calm of the battle-tested champion who, in a country where every male child dreams of becoming an *arslan*, had risen to take his place as the mightiest of the mighty. Was it Black Magic that had brought to this

part of the desert a fighter worthy to do battle with Kak Nan Tang?

The chieftain cut short the exchange. "We need no more words from you or your kind." He glanced over his shoulder at his sons to be sure no further words were spoken. The tribe moved off toward the watering hole.

K'ing turned to leave. They did not need water, and they had meant to cover many miles on the route back to Lin Fong's house by nightfall. They had hoped to reach the ruins of an ancient city a half day's journey to the south and sleep among the caves of its ruined dwellings. But Kak, seething inside, sauntered after the tribe and down to the watering hole. He folded his arms as the nomads set up their camp several hundred yards to the east and gazed disdainfully at the women as they watered the camels and filled vessels for cooking. K'ing could not make him hear a word.

Then the *arслан* led his horse to the water. It bent to drink ten feet away from Kak Nan Tang.

K'ing whispered to his companion, "Nothing but evil can come of our staying here. This man has done nothing to you. And anyhow, there is a way for violence to be avoided. If you will not take it, I will take it alone." He turned and stalked off, hoping Kak would follow.

He was two hundred yards off to the south when suddenly Kak's shout cut like a whip across his back: "Are you afraid of this leech who calls himself a lion? There is no place for fear in the hearts of the Masters of the Blue Circle!"

K'ing would have kept going but for the effect he knew these words would have on the proud son of a

Mongol chieftain. He bolted back toward the waterhole.

The wrestler wordlessly dropped the reins to his horse and moved toward Kak like a slow freight train about to crowd a cow from the tracks. Then: "It would be better for you if you had some fear." He stooped to his low posture and his arms weaved out before him, searching for an opening.

Kak took no dramatic posture. He gave no warning of what was coming other than the clear blazing of his black pupils and the slight shifting of his feet to grip the sand. His hands rose imperceptibly. "Another step," he said, "and you have lost your left eye."

The *arslan's* temper burst all bounds. "Run before you lose your life!" he growled. He had closed to within kicking range. K'ing was still far away.

"If you want death, you shall have it." Kak's voice gurgled like running blood.

The wrestler knew of Kung Fu fighting. He was well protected as his body swayed and the muscles in his shoulders worked in deep waves.

For any other accomplished Kung Fu fighter, the champion would have been a fair match, for Lightning Kicks and Tiger Claws and Knife Points could hardly be swifter or surer than the movements of Mongolia's greatest wrestlers. And once the *arslan* had closed on his enemy, catching a flying foot or shooting in beneath a blow to score a fall, all the jujitsu in the world could not have saved his victim from a swift and crushing death.

But while the wrestler had nearly the quickness of a Kung Fu fighter, Kak Nan Tang had nearly the strength of a wrestler. His Iron Hand was instant

death; his quickness was rivaled in all the world only by that of his own Master and his younger companion; and he had spent every day for four years studying the science of sudden death. To him, the moves of the lion were dull-witted and transparent.

It was over in seconds. Kak caught up with his enemy's rapid series of fakes and threw four or five of his own, offering kicking legs to grab at, flashing arms to catch, and smashing elbows to parry at close range. The wrestler's static posture, his inability to leap four or five feet backward parrying blows in the air, his habit of boring in no matter what the cost, made Kak's victory a foregone conclusion.

The *arslan* grabbed for a forearm as a Knife Point thrust at his gut. His elbow was met by a stunning Rock Smash Parry from Kak's free hand. A Raised Hoof Kick cracked the hard point of a shoe against his shin, a Low Dodge and Counter evaded his high grasp and sent a Ram's Head Punch thrudding into his ribs. When his hand clamped down on the wrist of Kak's attacking left, the Kung Fu fighter's right elbow crashed into his chin with a withering Monkey Blow, and his left knee lifted as his captured hand yanked downward. The wrestler's wrist, caught at just the right angle, cracked on Kak's kneecap. Now the free hand coiled upward like a cobra and struck. Its fingertips plunged into the socket of the Mongol's left eye. Kak's Eagle Beak dug the eyeball cleanly out."

The wrestler's screech rose above the pandemonium as women ran screaming back toward their camp for help. The blood-curdling sound cut to the quick of the desert. His arms

flailed as he stumbled blindly backward, blood spreading a red veil across his face and down over his throat and chest. Kak threw the eyeball at him. He had proved what he wanted to prove. Now he moved in for the kill.

So intent was Kak on final annihilation that he did not see the archer fitting an arrow to the string as he ran from the camp toward them.

So piercing were his victim's screams that he did not hear K'ing's heels throwing up tiny jets of sand, nor the sound of toes digging deeply as K'ing left the ground ten feet from him in a flying leap.

K'ing's arms crashed into the fat part of Kak's arm as the archer loosed his deadly missile.

K'ing had seen the bow drawing back out of the corner of his eye. He knew the aim would be true and that the arrow would fly to Kak's heart. He marked the place where Kak's heart would have been. As his companion sprawled off his heels to the ground, K'ing opened a space between his retreating legs. The razor-edge of the hunting arrow's head slit a tiny cut in his calf as it whirred between his legs, through the cloth of his robe, and bit into the water of the oasis.

Kak's fury at K'ing's intervention vanished as his ears played back the sound of the arrow's flight to him. Now, as men with guns came running from the camp and the archer fitted another shaft to the string and closed deliberately on him, he leapt at the maimed wrestler's pony, which still stood placidly by the waterside. His body pasted itself to the horse's hidden side. The fingers of his right hand seized its mane. His right ankle hooked up over the animal's back, and his left arm hugged its

throat from beneath. His head tucked in behind its neck. With his free left foot he kicked the stallion hard in the rump. It reared and bolted. It was far out into the desert, and Kak was up on its back and riding hard on the tribe's strongest animal before a pursuit could be mounted.

At a deadly range of thirty yards the archer turned his aim to Chong Fei K'ing.

The Son of the Flying Tiger stood straight upright and stared into the archer's eyes.

The bow bent and the string pulled past the Mongol's ear. Already he felt the tip that would bring down a Bengal Tiger homing to his enemy's chest. There were running footsteps behind him. His father's voice commanded him to hold. But the fingertips had parted.

K'ing watched the fingertips. When they slipped smoothly apart, all chance of changing the arrow's path of flight was gone. At that instant his arms flew up and he rose to his toes, pivoting sideways and sucking his stomach in. The arrow tore through his robe fractions of an inch from his gut. Its feathers caught the cloth and tugged at him as it followed the first into the water.

A hard hand came down on the archer's shoulder as the chieftain whirled him around and shouted at those who brought rifles to bear on K'ing to hold their fire. "Are you blind?" he screamed at his son. "This boy was trying to save your brother's life!"

The boy, for the first time in his life so filled with rage that he dared to defy his father, wrenched free and struggled to arm his weapon once more. "He saved his friend's life! My arrow would have torn his heart out!"

His father caught him and ripped the bow from his hand. Then he turned to K'ing, who stood over the fallen lion wiping blood from his face with his robe. The chieftain's chest heaved with the white heat of barely-controlled fury as the half-blind *arslan*, the pride of his life, stumbled to his feet and then fell into the shallow water. "Go!" he yelled at K'ing.

There was nothing the Son of the Flying Tiger could do. He turned his back and strode swiftly, silently after Kak Nan Tang.

He did not catch up with him until the next morning. He found him hiding among the ruins of the ancient village. Kak showed himself when he saw that K'ing was alone.

K'ing, although he had thought deeply on the encounter, had no idea what he would say to Kak. His problem was solved when Kak, seemingly unrepentant, spoke first: "I see that you too escaped unharmed from those animals. I suppose they thought you were attacking me and not trying to save my life?"

K'ing frowned angrily at him. "I was trying to keep you both from killing and from being killed," he said. "You were wrong to fight him. He was proud and hot-tempered, but you provoked him out of pride. You used the power Lin Fong has given you for a horrible purpose."

K'ing and Kak spent the rest of the day arguing over the incident. At first Kak insisted that he had been justified. But as K'ing went over every word that had been spoken, every expression and gesture, in the way Lin Fong had taught him, Kak's stubbornness began to ebb. For a long time K'ing

was not certain that Kak's increasingly repentant tone was sincere; for as Kak realized that at the very least Lin Fong himself would not have approved of his actions—even that Lin Fong might, if he heard about the incident, decide that he was not fit to be a Master of the Blue Circle and banish him before his training was completed—he began to be concerned about whether K'ing would tell the Master about it. “If you tell him,” Kak argued, “then I will have lost my chance to repent of my terrible mistake and learn from it. You have been raised by the Master from birth, and thus have the advantage, for you know his mind as well as you know your own. But I was raised until my tenth year in a worldly city where people believe that pride is important and that revenge may be taken for insults. I tell you this truly: that one mistake is enough to make me see the dark forces which have remained buried deeply within me from my childhood, and that I will meditate upon them day and night until I drive them out, so that I will never do such a thing again as long as I live. I will act as you acted, which was right. I have never before asked anything of you, but now I ask this—will you promise not to tell Lin Fong that I have done this terrible thing? For it may be that you yourself have done smaller things out of his presence that were evil, and yet you have not lost the greatest—dreams of your life because of them.”

In the end, K'ing promised. He promised because he believed that Lin Fong did not need to be told whether things were going wrong with Kak Nan Tang, and because he did not want to have any power to make the Master think ill of his friend. For the power Lin Fong had given to Kak was already

great—perhaps greater than Kak himself knew—and K'ing could only hope that his companion, with his support and the help of the Master, could make peace with himself and keep from using that power to do evil. Had he not promised, he would have made an enemy of Kak forever. Perhaps Kak then would have turned on Lin Fong and fought against the Blue Circle and everything it stood for.

Still, the promise weighed heavily on K'ing for many weeks, and he spent hours torturing himself over the question of whether he had been right to make it. After a time, as Kak displayed more tact in dealing with the nomad tribes they met on their travels and often asked Lin Fong questions about the good and evil of certain kinds of conduct while they were at home, K'ing began to feel that all would turn out well.

But months afterward, as they approached the spring of their fifth year in the Gobi, K'ing's promise came back with a vengeance to haunt him. For one day the Master took him aside and, to his astonishment, said, "There are certain things I have learned about Kak Nan Tang— things which I cannot tell you of—that trouble me deeply. It pains me to ask you this about your friend, but I must. Do you know of anything that might be interrupting the peace of his meditations, anything that might be making him incline toward the evils of Black Magic, anything which might make you suspect that he would use the powers I have given him for dark purposes?"

K'ing was unable to speak.

CHAPTER NINE

The Challenge

It was late summer, almost five years to the day after the arrival of Kak Nan Tang at the house of Lin Fong. In all that time K'ing had heard Lin Fong echo his own doubts about Kak's vision of the Tao and the mission of the Blue Circle but once.

Outwardly Kak was a fine boy— fifteen years old, tall and strong, handsome in his own rugged and cavalier way, a fighter fit to challenge the greatest Kung Fu Masters of the ages. K'ing, who had grown rapidly in the proceeding months, was now a fraction of an inch taller than his companion even though he was two years younger. Although from a distance strangers were captivated by his spectacular, more conventional good looks, from a closer range they found this impression superficial in comparison with the piercing genius and clarity of vision manifested in his sky-blue eyes. Together the pair was impressive, and their fame throughout the desert was almost as great as that of Lin Fong himself. K'ing wondered whether Kak was at peace with himself inwardly, but he tried not to let these questions disturb him; for he felt that if his companion was falling from the Way, the Master would do all that was possible to help him regain it.

Several weeks before Lin Fong had taken them aside and said, "In the time that you have been with me, I have opened my mind and searched it everywhere, and I have made it pour forth to you everything that I could discover in it about Kung Fu

and all other forms of hand-to-hand combat. And I have done my best to impart to you whatever feelings I have about the mission of the Blue Circle, which seeks to spread the peace of the Tao across the earth. You have journeyed across the desert together seeking wisdom; you have taken far deeper journeys into the depths of your minds during hours and days of meditation; and you have practiced Kung Fu night and day with an intensity that only those with great inner strength could have maintained. At the beginning it seemed to me there was an infinite number of things I could teach you about Kung Fu. My mind and my body barely knew where to begin, and my plans for your teaching ran for years in advance. But you both emerged as Masters more quickly than I thought. Now I find that I sometimes repeat myself, and that often you are anticipating what I will say.

“You are to stay here with me in the desert until you undergo your first trial. I cannot tell when the trial may come. But my feeling is that it will not be long.”

* * *

It was a day much like the day on which Kak had arrived.

The warm, ripe, dry winds marched evenly across the endless dunes. High above, the transparent air of mid-summer had turned humid, forecasting the coming of such a rainy season as the desert knew.

The three began a complicated talk about some Kung Fu techniques which Lin Fong had experimented with as a youth. He had discarded them because he was unable to perfect them. Now

the boys set their minds to work on the problem.

Suddenly from far out over the rocky southern ridge half a mile from the house, they heard a strange, low-pitched rumbling.

It was an engine, and its noise rose quickly in jagged, piercing rhythms. Soon the vehicle mounted the ridge and swung in its surging course to head straight toward them.

It was an American Army surplus jeep, fitted with wide tires for desert travel. From its very sound and the hard manner in which it was driven, K'ing could tell that evil was on the way. His mind flashed briefly back to the battle at the Place of the Steep Rocks, and to Lin Fong's prediction that some day—although it might be many years—vengeance for their victory there would be visited upon them.

As the three stood watching the machine thrust itself toward them over the sand, K'ing was well aware that Kak felt none of the apprehension that passed back and forth between himself and Lin Fong. Kak undoubtedly felt that, since he had not been able to go out into the world, the world had come to him.

The jeep stopped outside the sand fence. A tall blond man got deliberately, ceremonially out of it.

K'ing could tell at once, as much from the shape of his heavily muscled body and his aggressive bearing as from his narrow battle-formed Western features, that he was as American as his vehicle. He turned to face them. His eyes did not bother to linger on the house or its surroundings, but fastened firmly on Lin Fong.

K'ing was surprised to see that he wore the traditional tunic and baggy pants of formal Kung

Fu combat; except that the uniform was white, and emblazoned upon the front of the tunic was an ornately embroidered image of a Bengal tiger. Its exaggerated claws grasped forward, and its red mouth gaped with huge, sabrelike teeth.

So forceful was the intruder's presence that it took a moment for K'ing to realize that he was not alone. Two boys about Kak's age descended from the jeep on the side away from them and made their way around it to stand behind their Master.

Suddenly the air was thick with the threat of deadly combat. Lin Fong gazed at this man whom he had never seen shrewdly, with mystic recognition. He bowed politely, and waited to see whether he had correctly fathomed the stranger's purpose.

"You are Lin Fong," the man said, with a finality that made K'ing recognize with a shudder that he was not encountering Lin Fong, but beginning an ancient ritual.

"I am Lin Fong," the Master affirmed, in a tone that said, "I have wondered all my life when you would come. And all my life, I have been ready."

"It is said that you are the wisest of the sages, and the greatest of all Masters of Kung Fu."

Lin Fong was silent. His face betrayed no acknowledgement.

"It is said," the man intoned, "that you preach of the Tao, and that you call yourself a good man."

K'ing rankled. He had never heard Lin Fong claim to be a good man.

"But I, who have rid myself of my earthly name and taken the name of the Norse god Loki, a name

charged with the horrors of evil, deny that there is any good or any evil!

"There is nothing but man and the chaos of the universe which seeks to snuff out life. All of life is a fighting, and man must carve for himself out of the chaos a monument, which at the moment of his death, he may laugh at as it crumbles!

"So I am here, and we will fight—you for your Tao and your good and evil, or perhaps for your life, and I for the passing eternity of the moment of battle. For it is only in dancing with violent death that a man is truly a man."

K'ing's body quivered with the simple awesomeness of this challenge.

He scrutinized Lin Fong closely as the Master gazed steadfastly into Loki's eyes. Lin Fong was trying to feel whether Loki's statement had come from his very deepest depths. As the Master shook his head slowly in cold-blooded rejection of the offer to combat, K'ing knew that he had found nothing deeper—not even the tiniest space in which his words might move to start doubts in Loki's mind.

K'ing could feel Kak frowning inwardly. His eyes were wide at his Master's refusal to do battle. K'ing saw Kak's weight shifting slightly onto the foot away from Lin Fong, as if to dissociate himself from the Master.

Loki looked at Lin with the look of a man who has caught an animal in a trap, and who knows that though the animal's brain seeks wildly for escape, there is to be no escape.

"You will fight," he said. "For if you do not, you will die like a dog. And your pupils—are they

ready?"

Lin Fong was silent. K'ing's face was an impassive copy of the Master's. But Kak's very presence, although he stood stark still, radiated white heat.

Lin Fong smiled a smile of infinite wisdom.

"Death is death. A dog dies just as a man; just as any living thing. You may kill me in whatever way you like. I have no care for the manner of my going."

K'ing's mind glowed with the brilliance of his Master's stroke.

For Loki had come not for killing, but for fighting. Now Lin Fong's indifference to death left him powerless.

But at the same time K'ing could feel fore-shadowings of revulsion for the Master emanating from Kak's clouded gaze. K'ing could easily see that, were Lin Fong wrong—had Loki really come for killing and not for fighting—it would be Lin Fong's duty to fight him and kill him if he could.

This "if he could" lingered in K'ing's mind. For though the Master's age had not taken much from him, K'ing could see at a glance that his adversary would be formidable; although less so if he had come for killing, if he had come to do evil, than if he had come for fighting, and was Evil itself. But if he was this latter, Lin Fong would, according to his Way, seek to turn the currents of his thought upon themselves, and dissolve them into the peace of the Tao.

Loki spoke again. His blue eyes glazed over

beneath his sun-bleached hair until they were as mirrors.

"You will fight. At some point, all men will fight."

Then he turned and wordlessly led his proteges back to the jeep.

He drove off a few hundred yards and proceeded to set up a camp.

As soon as Loki had left, Lin Fong turned to his pupils, a lo

"You must not fight this man," he said, looking from one to the other, his gaze boring most penetratingly into Kak's nearly-defiant eyes.

"You must not fight him nor his followers. For he does not do evil: he is Evil. He is, knowingly or unknowingly, an emissary of the Red Circle. He may be a member of it, or he may be an ordinary mortal whose evil ways have put him under their power. But this is something that the Masters of Zhamballah, the true Masters of the Blue Circle, know which I do not. This I do know: that he must not be fought or killed. Whoever seeks his death will fall from the Way and come under the power of the Red Circle. He has been sent by Zedak to fight and kill me and win you away. He will be powerless over you unless you try to break his force with your own. If you do, then you yourselves will become evil."

He looked directly at Kak now. "Kak Nan Tang, beware: for you know better than I how intoxicating this man's words are to you, and if you let yourself be drawn into this fight, you will fall from the Way and rage off into the world yourself as the power of Evil incarnate. I speak plainly to you: this is not the fight of a man. If you fight it, you will be beyond

salvation. I have never ordered you to do anything. But now I order you: take, along with the power I have given you, the peace of the Tao. Without it you will be overcome by the urge to fight and kill. I order you: do not fight!"

Then he walked off and ascended his tower. There he plunged deeply into meditation.

K'ing watched the fate of his world hang in the balance as Kak, giving no sign of how Lin Fong's words had struck him, turned to him. "I know who this man is," he said. "He is not Loki, nor is he any spirit or emissary from the Red Circle. His name is Samuel. That is the only name he is known by. He is the greatest Master in the West—the greatest in the world after Lin Fong. But he is evil. He has murdered thousands." Then Kak turned angrily away and paced out into the desert.

K'ing himself emulated the Master and sought the peace of mindlessness. But his trance was broken in the late afternoon by the snarl of Loki's jeep returning.

The tunic with the raging tiger on its breast moved, two shadow figures behind it, to a point just outside the sand fence. There, Loki folded his arms, and, his body as rigid as rock, stood, his hard, threatening gaze casting a pall over the dwelling of Lin Fong.

Loki maintained his position until sunset. Lin Fong remained in his tower.

K'ing found himself meeting Loki's gaze and holding it until he saw him not as a human being, but as a piece of furniture, or as some inanimate object.

K'ing knew that never in a million years would

Lin Fong come down from his tower to face this enemy. He would starve, and go out of his body — he would shrivel to a skeleton in the wind and rain and sandstorms—before he would do this.

But he knew that Loki now was playing not upon the feelings of the unreachable Lin Fong, but rather on those of his vulnerable protege.

K'ing knew Kak. He knew Kak understood Lin Fong's ideas of Good and Evil. If Kak made the wrong choice, it would not be out of ignorance, but out of his grappling with himself and his urge to scale life's highest heights and plumb its deepest depths; to drink to the fullest, to miss nothing; to face all challenges, and to triumph.

For two days Loki maintained his vigil from sunrise to sundown outside the house of Lin Fong. K'ing stared, and wondered whether, if he had to, he could fight a good fight against this man. He told himself that, after five long years of days and nights of Kung Fu, he could battle creditably even with the Master; but the fact that he, unlike Kak, had chosen not to condition his hands, would put him at a huge disadvantage. And even more important, he wondered whether the Urge to Kill, which he had long since faced and banished, would not be necessary in such a struggle. But, he realized, this was the urge that joined the will to fight with the will to escape one's own death; and he quickly sent these doubts whirling away.

As K'ing struggled hour by hour with these thoughts, and became accustomed to Loki's evil presence, Kak spent long hours in the turmoil of his own disturbed meditations, staring down into the sand with a ferocity that could have melted it, or pacing like a man in a jail cell out into the desert

and then returning.

On the third day, just as the sun showed its flaming orange rim on the horizon, Lin Fong unexpectedly descended from his tower.

Lin Fong, without a word to K'ing, went to the well and drew up water to drink. Then went inside to eat a little food.

At nightfall Kak returned and settled silently onto his sleeping pallet. He closed his eyes, and seemed to sleep. But K'ing and the Master exchanged glances as he tossed and quivered—either with the power of turbulent dreams or with clashing emotions that would not let him rest.

K'ing lay awake all night, listening to Kak's ragged breathing and the sounds of his limbs as they jerked and quivered.

By morning, Kak had lapsed into a deep sleep, and in the light K'ing gazed at his face. The once-bright eyes were sunken in their sockets. His once-fat cheeks seemed hollow. His head looked strangely like a fleshless skull.

But the depth and apparent peace of his rest gave K'ing hope.

That afternoon, when the sun was at its zenith, beating down upon the desert sands and the house of Lin Fong with naming fury, Loki stirred in his silent vigil.

To K'ing's eyes the slow, decisive movement was like a mosaic coming to life.

Kak Nan Tang was sitting by the side of the well, staring down into its black depths. Lin Fong and K'ing stood together in front of the house, watching Loki and his followers as they made their way

toward them.

Loki's eyes bored straight into those of Lin Fong.

K'ing could see that he would attack.

Loki was fifty feet away, and then thirty, and then twenty. The Master's hands hung loosely at his sides. He gazed past Loki as if he were seeing through him.

Ten feet, and then five feet, and Loki's right hand began to rise, and his eyes glowered with murder. And now reality slammed at K'ing with its devastating explosion: Lin Fong was going to die.

Loki's hands slashed downward with the bloodlust of the executioner's axe to squash the frail, grey haired skull.

But Lin Fong was gone.

The hand cut its lethal path downward through the bottom of the sky.

Loki leapt, a furious mass of scything blows and bone-crushing kicks and clawing fingers and pounding knees and bashing elbows.

* * *

There was a cosmic sandstorm on the desert. The winds rushed the breath out of the boy as they sliced his face with tiny knifing crystal bullets.

Out of the howl of the wind, out of its powerful curses, the boy drew music; out of the force of the wind, he took strength.

* * *

Every lethal attack, Lin Fong evaded or parried.

The air was clouded with dust and the noises of lungs drawing desperate breaths.

Cries screamed forth from Loki's twisted mouth; cries of birds of prey streaking downward, talons clutching; of the rumbling roar of a cave—in deep in a mine shaft; cries of the cracking explosion of the gunshell, and of the fast, fatal flight of the bullet; cries of cows slaughtered and of men under torture.

But the cries echoed into the wasteland, empty.

Lin Fong did not seek to put a distance between himself and Loki. Rather at times he seemed briefly to close on him, only to melt through him in a flash and come out behind, already parrying Loki's next attack. The Master, K'ing suddenly saw, was dancing with death!

After the first horrible rush when K'ing had made Lin Fong dead in his mind, the blood cleared from his head, whirling away in a freshwater stream that welled up deep within him.

Now he could see.

In fact, the action seemed to slow before his eyes in order that he might grasp it fully. Seconds before he had been sure that, had Loki come at him with such an attack, he would have withered and died with the first rush. But now, as Loki raged on and on, K'ing in his mind matched imaginary actions of his own to those of the Master. He saw that Lin Fong was doing nothing that he himself could not do. He began predicting the Master's movements now as his eyes fastened on Loki's body and his comprehension covered it like a huge net. Chong Fei K'ing saw many, many chances for the Master to attack; and although all were fraught with

danger, he knew that even in Lin Fong's old age he could, if he wanted, kill this man. Lin Fong was truly the greatest of the Masters.

Suddenly the closeness of the two bodies, and their ever-flowing rhythms of attack and defense, turned them in K'ing's mind into the Yin and Yang.

This vision opened in K'ing a well that reached to the very depths of Lin Fong's Way: for the Yin and Yang were in eternal opposition. But neither one was truly good or evil. This far had Lin Fong compromised himself in this encounter with Evil itself, that now Good and Evil were dissolved, and both rode smoothly on the whirling currents of the world's indifference.

Suddenly the furious pace of the fighting slowed. Occasionally Lin Fong had to turn back new attacks as Loki's rage welled up once more within him. But after a time the sounds of panting were the only sounds left in the still air, and Loki and the Master stood facing one another.

Lin Fong's visage betrayed the slight smile of the mystic.

But suddenly Loki turned to his followers.

Some signal had been given. The taller of the two raced toward Kak, and the other toward K'ing; and now the proteges of Lin Fong were put to the test.

K'ing's blood flooded his brain for an instant as he smashed aside a high kick and a sharp punch and dodged an elbow and danced aside in the face of another combination of kicks.

He saw an opening for the death blow, and his human blood cried out to him to put an end to the battle.

So strong was this urge that he fought himself for an instant, and a Knife-Point lanced into his gut, blanking his consciousness in a swirl of numbed nerves.

K'ing's body fought without eyes and without mind, arms and legs now on their own, sensing danger with deeply primal power and fending it off while awaiting their Master's return. But when, an instant later, K'ing came rushing back to himself, he was miraculously alive. Now his body slipped smoothly into the simple work of evasion.

He had become as Lin Fong.

With the first attacking rush of his followers, Loki had descended upon Lin Fong again—surely not thinking that he could kill the Master, but intending to keep him busy while his followers went to work.

The fight had also come to Kak Nan Tang. His eyes were bright with joy and fire.

In an instant Loki's pupil lay withering on the ground, the muscles of his thighs and back convulsing uncontrollably from the impact of Kak's ruthless but calculated blows.

Now Loki's pupil gazed up into the inferno of Kak's eyes.

Kak made a threatening move to put an end to him.

The boy was not at peace with his own death. He whimpered and cringed.

"I should claw out your guts with my fingers," Kak hissed down at him. "But now that you see how worthless your sniveling life is, I will let you keep it!" Then he folded his arms and, unmindful of

the spectacle of Lin Fong and Chong Fei K'ing whirling and darting and dancing behind him, wandered off into the desert.

No sooner had Kak turned away than Loki, who had seen his protege fall and whimper for his life, broke off his pursuit of Lin Fong and stood stark still. Then he walked calmly over to the wounded boy and with a single kick squashed out his brains.

Chong Fei K'ing felt his adversary melt away.

Only the dimly flickering electricity of passing death disturbed the tomb-like stillness that descended before the house of Lin Fong.

Loki turned slowly to his remaining protege.

"That is how cheap life is when one flees from the joy of one's own death and ceases to stare fearlessly into the abyss."

Loki and his remaining pupil faded away to their camp.

The form of Kak Nan Tang was small already on the southern ridge.

Lin Fong and Chong Fei K'ing stared at each other. K'ing's mind was full of Kak Nan Tang and the horrible fate of the enemy whose life he had somehow brought himself to spare. But Lin Fong said, "Kak Nan Tang is beyond us now. Either he will come back of his own accord, or he will stray from the Way, perhaps never to find it again. But the fight he now fights within himself is no longer a fight we can help him to win. We will put him out of our minds."

That was all.

Later, K'ing and Lin Fong talked of the sudden, surprising attack of Loki.

"It was very brilliant," Lin Fong said. "For he had come to realize that I would never fight him as he wished, and had said to himself, 'I will go butcher this man. If he lets me kill him, I will be sorry, for I will have lost the chance to fight the greatest fight of this age. This will make my soul sick. But if I go without the will to butcher him, he will see through me, and when at the last moment I pull back, and he still stands unshaken before me, he will have his victory. So I must take the gamble that he will follow his Tao and try to turn my power onto his lustreless Way. Then I will surely smash his defenses and kill him. And at the last, he will surely give way to the urge to fight.' Yes, this man is very deep. The depth of Evil is as deep as the depth of Good."

Kak Nan Tang did not return that night. Lin Fong and Chong Fei K'ing slept soundly in the hope that he had left the desert forever, and would somehow find the Way again in the course of his world wandering. Perhaps he would see how his fighting back had snuffed out the life of Loki's follower, even though he himself had not done the killing. Perhaps he would realize that he should have taken the course of his Master and his companion.

But the next morning, Lin Fong awoke troubled.

He went outside and sniffed the air.

He felt the breeze with his fingers.

He looked all around him, as if to take a strong grasp upon his small world—house, sand, and sky.

Then he ascended his tower, climbing the rungs of its ladder slowly, feeling the familiar wood almost with fondness. Instantly his body became a shell, and he flowed out of himself to ride across the

lands and oceans his body had once traveled upon the Wind that Blows in the Void.

Suddenly the house of Lin Fong became no more to Chong Fei K'ing than the pile of boards that it had always been for the Master. The world of the desert collapsed into meaningless-ness.

Then Kak Nan Tang returned.

His dark form appeared on the southern ridge just as it had on the first day of his coming; only now the thrusting of his lethal limbs across the sand spewed rays of darkness out before him, and his black, rage-clouded visage flamed forth with the fires of hell. He strode past Chong Fei K'ing as if he did not exist, and halted before the tower of Lin Fong.

There he stood, and there he waited.

At sundown, as the shadow of Lin Fong stretched long and thin across the sand and then melted invisibly at its edges into the coming night, the sage rose slowly. He stood and turned, his eyes sweeping the wide arc of the compass until the arc had become a circle.

Then he descended.

He stood before Kak Nan Tang, and his thin lips parted. "You have killed them," he said. "I saw their bodies from the tower the moment I ascended it."

CHAPTER TEN

The Murder

Kak stood completely silent for a moment, his defiant gaze seeking something to confront in the dimensionless vacancy of the Master's eyes. His body tensed, as though his control of it would help him in the coming fight. "Yes," he said. "I killed them. Both of them."

Now his dark eyes flamed. His words came in ruthless torrents. Years of self-denial parted. The veil of deception that had long hidden the evil soul of Kak Nan Tang was torn asunder.

"Yesterday when I was attacked my very body—the body which you have trained—rebelled at fleeing, rebelled at defending without attacking, rebelled at the sight of unopposed evil taunting me, and lashed out! My mind forced out all your empty words. For you are a coward even though you have no fear. The blood of life sang to me, and my soul danced to the music of the fight."

His voice rose angrily.

"I would not have this shame any longer—the shame that will not let me rest. The shame of the cowardliness which you have thrust upon me!"

His voice fell to a low, mean hiss: "I did not kill that boy yesterday. So great was the power I had over him that I chose how I would make him powerless! Before I struck, I saw the way he would fall, and felt every pain that would be in him! I felt with him the fear of death as he cowered and I

triumphed!"

"It was not for you that I let him live, but for myself: Kak Nan Tang! I let him live because I wanted the fear that I put in him to live. I walked away to leave him trembling through the rest of his days with the terror that I might someday return.

"But then his Master killed him.

"His Master did right to kill him. For he was nothing but a fighting body with a fighting heart torn out of it. He was worthless as a camel without with legs!

"But then, when Loki had killed him, I knew that I had killed him first. My Way had split off forever from the Way of Lin Fong."

Then his head shook slowly in rejection of the teaching of Lin Fong.

"Your Way leads nowhere but to the barren wastelands of a desert life. You push aside the cup, and die before your time with your endless empty trances!"

He stopped, furor bubbling on the surface of his face.

"You are no Master, nor are you fit to be a Master!

"Once you went out into the world. Enough of your senseless babbling of Good and Evil! For you went, if you were ever a man, as all men go: to fight! To fight, and to defy your death! To fight, and to triumph, and to stand over your fallen enemy, feeling the precious blood of life still coursing through your veins, to feel your lungs sucking in the air and making you dizzy with joy!

"But in your worthless old age, when an evil man

comes upon you, you make him into a god— and you run from him like an old fool with terror in his heart because he has offended a god!”

Now the fire in Kak Nan Tang's soul raged out of control: “But this man was not a god! For I have fought him, and I have killed him and his worthless disciple, and I have strewn their guts on the hillside, and torn off their heads with my bare hands. I have smashed their heads like eggs on the rocks of the desert! I have tasted their blood, and eaten their flesh!

“Their bodies lie there even now, their blood boiling in the sun. And soon the birds of prey will come to eat their share—to pick the eyes out of their skulls and clean their stinking flesh from the pieces of their shattered bones!”

Kak's eyes suddenly grew small, as his mind swirled away to the memory of the battle.

“It was pitch black and I entered their camp. They were asleep in their tent.

“I lit a torch and flung it in upon them.

“They awakened from their sleep to see me standing before them, orange in the light of the flames.

“Loki spoke to me in the tones of a deity. But I looked at him with the coldness of human slaughter. And even to himself he became no more than a man.

“He said, 'You have come to take up your challenge.' Then he called to his pupil.

“I said to Loki, 'My fight is not with this lamb which you would put before me, that I may butcher him. My fight is with you! After I have killed you,

then I will kill this other worthless fool.'

"He bowed.

"I stood upright.

"You are bowing to your own death,' I told him.

"Then we fought.

"From the first I knew how I would kill him. For I had seen him fight Lin Fong.

"He was hard, relentless, powerful: he had the Urge to Kill welling up out of him.

"He has left many bruises on my body." He pulled up the sleeve of his robe and shoved an arm purple with welts into Lin Fong's face.

"But I had seen from Lin Fong how to give him the death blow: and where Lin Fong would not attack, Kak Nan Tang did!

"This man had not the patience to wait to spill the blood he thirsted after.

"At first I fought him without striking, just as you did. I closed upon him. I flew through him. I whirled by him, working upon his mind with the power of many chances to harm him passed over, until he ceased to dance.

"He began to work.

"I could feel the tiny quivers of doubt that passed through him.

"We fought on.

"Parts of his body started to go their separate ways, each one lusting now for relief, for an instant of rest; for the feel of smashing the body which would not let them rest.

"Loki's body was stronger than yours. His hand

blows—the Ram's Head and the Knife Slash—were faster and harder.

“But his limbs had taken over their own control.

“I worked at each of them with parries that gave him pain, jabbing my fingers like lances into his arms, cracking at the bones of his legs. And my feet—my feet were far faster than his.

“I was tiring him.

“I had known this American did not have the inner strength for a long battle. He called too early upon the Urge to Kill.

“I took it from him and gave him back the cowardly urge to live.

“Now the outer defenses were battered, and even his follower lost faith as he foresaw the end of this battle in the moonlight. For his master had always killed quickly.

“Now I pretended myself to be tiring. I laid a trap for him!

“I breathed as I have never breathed before: hard, and desperately. I sailed upon the rush of strength that I drew from my feigned weakness.

“I mounted a furious assault, Lightning Kicks that smashed his weary arms and grazed his chin; Knife-Point blows that speared toward the pit of his stomach.

“I pretended it was a desperate attempt to finish him before I myself faltered!

“Then, screwing up my face in feigned agony, I lunged at him with a clumsy Tiger Claw.

“I flaunted before him my open groin, the path to his salvation!

“But when his foot flashed out, I whirled my back to him and showed him the Iron Hand falling like a guillotine upon his skull: too late for him to stop it!

“Ah! But I did not strike the death blow!

“I crushed his cheek bone and sent blood welling to his mouth.

“Then I heard footsteps in the sand behind me. His follower, seeing the fight decided, dove into the burning ruins of their tent, and clawed among them. I chased him.

“I saw the gun-barrel rise up out of the ashes in his hand, glowing Evil in the moonlight.

“But my toe snapped the bone of his arm, and my fingers raked the cowardliness from his eyes.

“Through the blood that splattered upon his face, Loki stared to meet the grin of certain death.

“Now I went slowly, marching in upon him with blows that battered and numbed his arms and legs.

“I worked inward as his defenses crumbled, till at last he fell backward, a crimson sea gurgling in his throat.

“I rested my foot on his neck as his body jerked and quaked.

“But now I could not make fear come forth again in his eyes: for he knew he was dying, and already beyond the mercy I would never show him.

“When I crushed his throat flat I listened to the music of the tiny sounds of death. I saw the final, lifeless glaze make clay out of the whites of his eyes. I knew that I had not fought him. I had murdered him!

“And thus it will be with all who challenge the

power of Kak Nan Tang!"

Kak's body shivered, and his eyes darted, a horrible reflection of the tale he told.

The stream of words which had slashed like sabres at the breast of Lin Fong died away to their cold conclusion:

"And thus it will be with you."

The veil of Kak's robe parted, and from it his hand pulled forth the gun.

Its muzzle floated free in the desert air.

Pulled by the power of the turning earth, it aimed its tiny hollow of blackness at the heart of the old man.

Lin Fong stood as though listening to an ancient tale told yet another time.

There were no last words for Lin Fong. He had none.

The impulse from the heart to the trigger was sent. The trigger jerked backward, and the firing pin descended upon the back of the shell, denting it sharply.

The blast tore aside the curtains of the sky, revealing utter blackness and blinding light. The fissures of earthquake split the ground to its molten core.

The small, carefully shaped bit of lead reached Lin Fong's skin. It parted the layers of muscle, and passed into the cage of ribs that enclosed his slowly pumping heart. This it punctured, and passed through chambers of crimson until it entered into the space of a lung.

Then it moved out again, forcing its way through

soft walls and silky barriers until it found the sunlight once more.

It was finally halted by the numb insistence of a few inches of desert sand.

Lin's body still stood as red sea water spread rapidly to stain his white robe.

The eyes of Chong Fei K'ing widened to see the whole universe, and his destiny in it, as the Master's hands traveled upward and outward toward Kak.

The fingers made a choking motion.

Kak's mouth opened in a noiseless scream of horror.

He staggered backward. Could bullets not kill this man?

But then he grasped once more at the power of the gun.

He emptied it into Lin Fong's body even as it slumped and toppled to the ground.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Fight

Chong Fei K'ing sorrowed not an instant longer over the passing of Lin Fong than the Master himself would have.

Boldly he closed on Kak Nan Tang.

He did not think of the might of this man who had killed three times since the last rising of the moon.

He did not so much as remember the softness of his own hands.

He never doubted what his task was.

He never doubted he should kill Kak Nan Tang now.

* * *

"Loki!" his voice thundered.

The judgement spun Kak around to face him. K'ing stared into eyes that showed no traces of fresh murder; eyes that crackled with the pure Urge to Kill.

"Not Loki!" came the screeching reply, "But Kak Nan Tang! For Loki is dead, and I am alive! I have made my name greater than the name of Loki!"

Kak took a step backward as K'ing bore down on him.

Then, as the sun set and the moon filtered its

first soft rays through a high gauze of streaming clouds, he attacked.

* * *

Brown limbs flashed in the eerie light as the hurricane tide of Kak's hate broke over K'ing's impenetrable defenses. His blows fell like sledgehammers; his kicks came like battering-rams.

Darts and lances answered, pouring through the holes in his armor: darts and lances from a fortress built of air.

Kak had thought to kill at once.

Compared to Loki, who was Chong Fei K'ing? Let all his mindless meditations save him now!

But out of the void of the desert wasteland, the Eagle Beak of K'ing's fingers plucked at his eyes, and the Scorpion of K'ing's back-handed knuckles rapped at his temples. His bludgeoning assault suddenly became a sieve.

Quickly Kak shoved back the Urge to Kill and kept it like coiled spring deep in his guts while he struggled to grasp the whole of the body which in his mind he had already dismembered.

Kak's vision cleared, and now he danced. Sinking to his knees, exploding upward, swiveling, striking, blocking, parrying, evading, he gained equilibrium. Now two death machines were set against each other, to battle till one broke.

Kak leaped, legs bunched at his chest: a flying double-kick. His Iron Hands slashed downward to protect his legs and groin.

With joy he watched as K'ing evaded, leaning sideways and back, leg rising to puncture his kidney with a snapping toe.

Half of the double kick lashed out to knock away K'ing's attack. The other foot thudded its heel into K'ing's thigh, missing his groin by inches.

K'ing rolled to his back on the sand.

Kak descended upon him. A Knife-Point stabbed at K'ing's face.

K'ing snapped his head away and parried blindly. His body rolled.

K'ing's foot blindly felt the pull of a target as his neck flashed into range of Kak's Iron Hand.

A shuddering shock jarred Kak from his guts. His attacking hand turned to defense as he fought off waves of oblivion. He rolled away, spitting sand.

K'ing shot upward. He pounced on the body that flailed desperately away from him like a wind-blown leaf.

He was met by a Knife-Point that stabbed his shoulder.

He clawed at Kak's eyes.

A Hammer Blow slammed the side of his head, splitting the skin. Blood ran with sweat in thin lines over his face. His eyes clouded and stung.

Kak found his footing.

K'ing's Boulder Block met Kak's Ram's Head. Kak's fist all but shattered.

K'ing brushed away a Lighting-Kick and surged forward. A thousand feet exploded in Kak's face, and he staggered back.

K'ing came at him, four limbs flashing in fakes and attacks as he sought to shake the blood from his eyes and put an end to Kak Nan Tang. A Buffalo Horn speared Kak's kidney with a single knuckle. A Pounding Wave crashed almost fatally over his head.

Kak stumbled to the porch of the house of Lin Fong. He put one of its supports between himself and his enemy as he shook his head to clear it.

A flash of K'ing's foot snapped the thin board. Mud and straw fell onto them as K'ing's right hand pounded across Kak's retreating back.

Kak's desperate whirl carried him once more to the sand.

K'ing leapt from the porch at him. His Dragon Stamp pounded Kak's knee.

A Monkey Blow smashed pain into K'ing's shin.

Kak fought his way to the well. His head was whirling. He put the stone between himself and his enemy.

The well-bucket dangled between them. K'ing ripped down the bucket and its frame. He leapt across the mouth of the deep shaft. His flying Dragon Stamp grazed Kak's disappearing shoulder.

A Rock Smash caught K'ing's ankle hard. His body shuddered, poised over the darkness of the well. Kak's Iron Hand flashed at his stomach.

Even as he fell, K'ing's Rock-Smash blunted Kak's blow, and his free hand seized the arm that dealt it.

They would go crashing down the death-hole together.

K'ing thought only of the blows he would strike before they hit the water, and how he would drown Kak in the abyss.

But Kak's body held to the ground outside the well, and K'ing felt a Knife-Slash descending to crack his arm and break his grasp.

He hauled against the arm. His feet shot out of the well as his head dipped more deeply into it.

Kak's blow fell on his leg as his feet thudded into a skull.

Kak was dazed as K'ing found himself for an instant helplessly scrambling, hung by his stomach on the curving stone wall. He came upright with a blind Swooping Bird Parry, both hands rising up and out to deflect whatever Kak threw. A Tiger Claw glanced harmlessly aside.

K'ing regained the sand again and stared at the hateful broad nose and shallow nostrils that flared to suck in air. Now Kak's black hair ran with the blood that K'ing's hard kick had brought forth.

Kak was groggy.

He feigned blackout.

K'ing speared at his eyes.

Kak blasted upward, smashing K'ing's chin with a Monkey Blow. K'ing saw it all but too late. A subtle twitch of his head kept it from killing.

K'ing fell backward.

Kak reached down and drew from the pool of darkness that was his soul.

Weakly K'ing warded off blows and stumbled as Kak's heels sent him reeling with Dragon-Stamp after Dragon-Stamp.

K'ing saw an opening. He lanced his clawing fingers into Kak's face, tearing a fat cheek. He kicked himself free.

Then they raged out into the desert, whirling and leaping and thrusting; over the sand fence, over patches of hard rock and stretches of loose stone.

They fought their way back again.

Pain and exhaustion slowed their movements as they swam in the murky waters of delirium.

Kak stumbled into the house. K'ing dogged his heels, kicking and slashing. Kak gained into the tiny kitchen and seized a knife from a shelf.

K'ing threw an iron pot at his head and leapt upon him.

The knife slit his side.

His Hammer Blow on the back of Kak's knife hand drove the knife's point into Kak's thigh.

Kak released the weapon to parry a blow to the face.

They careened out the back door, leaping and stumbling over the stone oven.

An iron poker sang through the air.

K'ing ducked. The black shaft whizzed through his hair.

He countered, combinations of blows and kicks forcing Kak into retreat.

The poker flew off.

Chong Fei K'ing and Kak Nan Tang fought the battle of death from sundown to sunrise.

The body of Lin Fong lay cooling in the shroud of his blood-soaked white robe.

Through the late night hours the dance moved with the fury of a pace too rapid to reckon.

In the dank, hollow hours of the morning, it slowed to the primal crawl of pain and exhaustion past feeling. It became a pure battle of will.

The moon was still high when a rock-like foot crashed into K'ing's face as he rolled in the dust, catching his lower lip and punching a tooth through it.

It was starting to wane when a knifing finger glanced off Kak's throat and K'ing's nails scraped layers of skin from it.

Every instant, each knew: the tiniest error was instant death.

There were times when Chong Fei K'ing deeply wished for this death: the death that Lin Fong had so well taught him to accept. But each time he whirled away this wish: for he would not die to escape the torture of the fight. Nor would he let Kak Nan Tang loose into the world.

More than once, he thought that death had come to him.

And more than once he thought that he had killed Kak Nan Tang.

The moonlight faded into the heartless fluorescence of the dead hours.

The strength had long since gone from their bodies.

Kak's slashing blows came weakly. Now the very heaviness of his hands weighed against him.

In the deepest pit of the night, two animals bared their fangs and claws: to devour, or be devoured.

Their sweat ran salty with the blood of their open wounds. They rode on the thin stings above the battered pulp of their bodies.

Now Kak snarled and muttered, his wild black hair pasted with dirt and gore to the battered purple flesh of his forehead. His blue robe was torn.

He searched for a way to break K'ing's will as they lunged and countered and parried in slow motion. His stance had turned to the lumbering of the grizzly bear.

His lips quivered as if to speak.

Over his shoulder, K'ing's eyes grasped briefly at the strength of the wind and the sand and the black sky, as the first traces of morning light appeared.

Kak's eyes tracked his. A Pounding Wave crashed into the brief opening.

K'ing was ready. He limped aside.

Once more Kak's thick lips parted. His throat was a white paste of foam stained scarlet.

He choked on his words. Blood gurgled in his throat.

He strained again.

His eyes flamed dark flames. Then, the killing words came forth:

"It was your promise..." he gasped; "... it was your promise to me that killed Lin Fong!"

K'ing went pale with furious hate and the Urge to Kill. Drunkenly he lunged forward.

A stinging handful of sand erupted into his eyes.

Out of the blinking, gritty blindness, a hammer

cracked his head, and a dagger sunk into his gut, and a club thudded into his groin.

He left his body behind and dove deeply for the peace of the Tao.

The music of the Wind played to him.

Out of the dim indifference of the faraway stars, words came with the music:

“It is a lie!”

And then he was rolling, and his legs kicked out.

The spinning of the earth and sky stopped. He dug his toes into the bottomless desert sand.

The sound of his own panting screamed to him.

He rose, and more thoughts echoed: “If you have spent your last, then so has Kak Nan Tang! And if he has not, then you have not!”

Out of the blur he saw a shadow stalking him.

He kicked at it.

It melted, then returned.

He kicked at it again.

The form came clear.

The agony of his body he now left behind. He knew he might die from his wounds when the fight was over. But he would not die before.

And then the east lit up with pale pink light that flamed rapidly toward the life-giving clarity of the morning.

And the Son of the Flying Tiger said, “With the first fire of the sun's rim on the horizon, I will spend my last. For now we are as shells, empty but for our wills; and the Good and Evil that is in us must fight alone.”

K'ing could feel the sun coming.

It was the first rising of the sun after the death of Lin Fong.

Lin Fong!

The sage's tower stood topped with a band of light. The barren gray wood caught the sun's rays and burned with them.

And then the band of light that spread across the desert flashed on to the forehead of Chong Fei K'ing.

He glanced at where the body of Lin Fong had lain all night.

The sun's rim flashed with quiet conflagration over the desert's edge; and then its light, diving deeply to the soul of Chong Fei K'ing, drew up an answering shaft of brilliance: for the sage's blood-stained robe was empty!

K'ing froze in horrified amazement.

The words were out of his mouth before he could look again.

"The body of Lin Fong is gone!"

These were the only words in all of the world's languages which could have opened the tiniest crack in the will of Kak Nan Tang. They made his startled eyes leave the body of his prey for an instant. Even before they had settled on the bloody robe, his mind in panic had called them back. But it was too late.

Chong Fei K'ing had spent his last. It was his sudden seizing upon Kak Nan Tang's last and only, tiny fear: that Lin Fong was immortal.

The scream of the mutilation of Kak Nan Tang

scarred the very desert as the fingers of the Son of the Flying Tiger raked his face.

A lightning-flash instant of doubt—or a second's horrible sight of the truth: time enough to name, but never time enough to kill.

Kak staggered back, hands clutching his forehead where two bloody gouges oozed deeply from his eyebrows to his hairline: gouges that would never heal. Gouges that would mark him for the rest of his flight around and around the world. Gouges that branded him with the indelible mark of evil.

K'ing stared at his fingers as they dripped blood, still in a position he had never dreamed of. What force had formed them that way in their flight, he would never know.

Kak reeled off, his cries choked with vomit as he fell to the sand and crawled and then struggled upright again. Clutching his forehead, blinded with his own blood, he clawed his way over the sand fence.

K'ing made a slogging step to follow.

Then he fell.

He could not make his limbs work.

The form of Kak Nan Tang disappeared, shrouded in screams, over the southern ridge.

Epilogue

Chong Fei K'ing lay from sunrise to sunrise where he had fallen. Had Kak Nan Tang returned, he could have put an easy end to him as he slept.

But Kak Nan Tang did not return.

As K'ing lay unconscious, as motionless as his dead Master, the blood clotted on his wounds under the baking rays of the desert sun, and the forces of nature coursed through his body, busy with the work of repair.

But when he awakened, he was all but paralysed. His stiff muscles would not move, and when he forced them, he opened wounds everywhere.

By evening, he managed to crawl to the well and let the bucket down to draw water from the shaft that had nearly been his tomb.

It was another hour's work to struggle into the house and search out food.

The next day, his body rapidly gaining strength, he buried the body of Lin Fong where it lay. The Master's tower was his gravestone.

As he lowered the torn corpse into the pit he had scratched out of the sand, K'ing caught sight of the key that still hung on its thin thread around Lin Fong's neck.

The ivory box—and Lin Fong's last legacy of secrets!

His heart filled with joy at the thought of learning yet more and deeper mysteries from his Master;

and these last teachings would surely be the deepest of all.

He forced himself to meditate over the grave of the Master before going to get the box.

As he did, one thought, one desire, emerged: to find and kill Kak Nan Tang. Until he did this, it would be his life's work.

As he came out of his trance, two revelations struck him at once.

The first was that Kak would not flee him, alone, to remote corners of the earth. Kak would never disappear without a trace. Rather, he would ally himself with the evil forces of the world wherever he found them—for Loki had, even at the price of his own life, won Kak over to the Red Circle.

The second was that, sooner or later, Kak would remember Lin Fong's ivory box. Then he would know that the last and the greatest of the powers of Lin Fong had fallen into the hands of his arch-enemy. Whatever Lin Fong had written, it would aid him by striking Kak's heart with the fear of the unknown magic he believed it contained.

K'ing went into the house and took the box from the mantle over the fireplace. With it and its key, he went outside and, for the first and last time, ascended Lin Fong's tower.

There, with the breeze blowing quietly past, he fitted the key into the box and opened it.

He removed a single sheet of paper.

He stared at it with stunned incomprehension.

His brow clouded as he strained to understand, to forgive, to whirl away his disappointment.

Then, suddenly, Chong Fei K'ing laughed.

The soul of the Master laughed on the wind with him.

The sun sparkled on the pure, white, empty sheet as it left K'ing's parting fingers and floated to the ground.



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